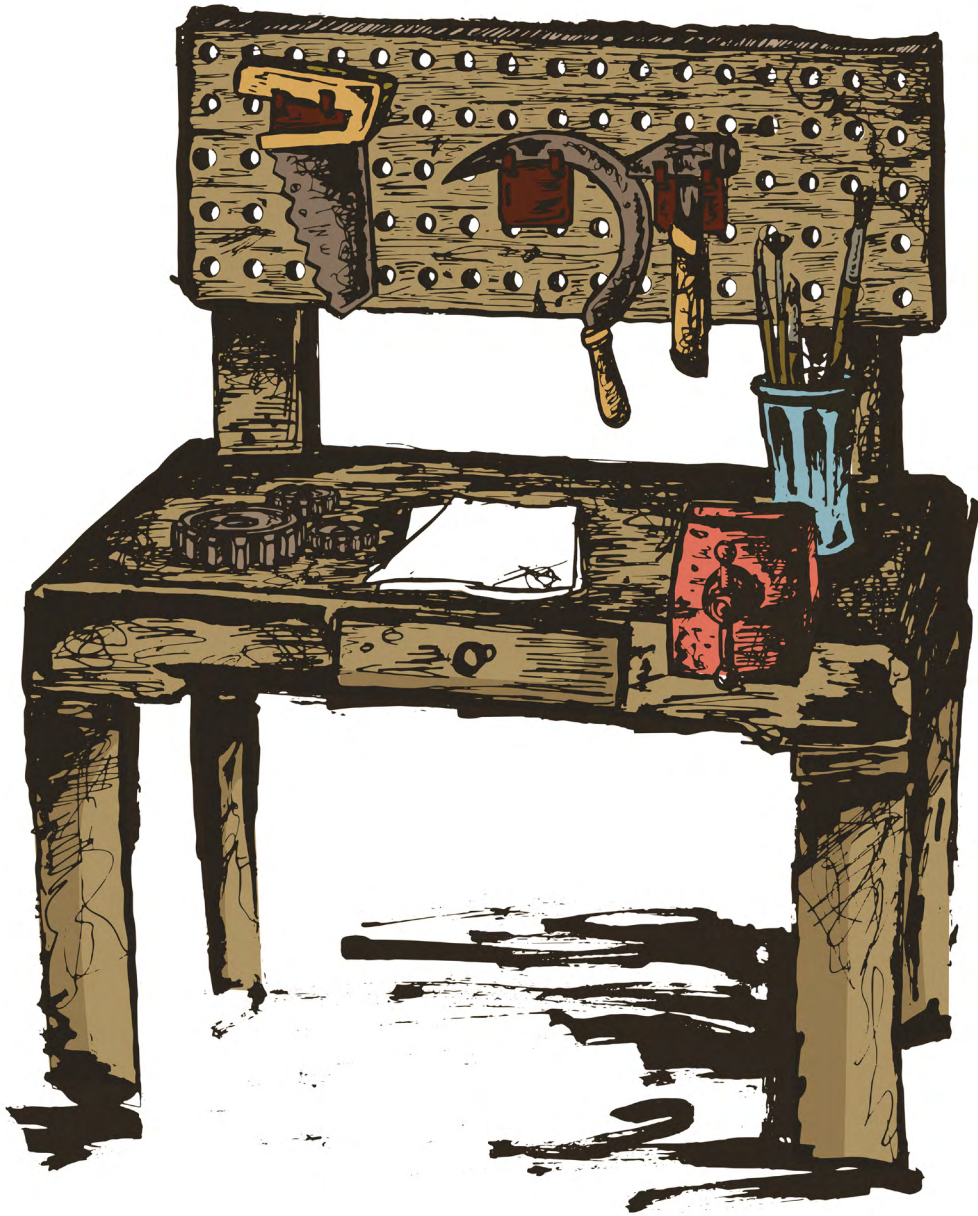


MADE CHINA

JOURNAL



VOLUME 5, ISSUE 1, JAN-APR 2020

THE WORK OF ARTS

Aesthetics and Subaltern Politics in China



MADE IN CHINA JOURNAL

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The *Made in China Journal* (MIC) is a publication focussing on labour, civil society, and human rights in China. It is founded on the belief that spreading awareness of the complexities and nuances underpinning socioeconomic change in contemporary Chinese society is important, especially considering how in today's globalised world Chinese labour issues have reverberations that go well beyond national borders. MIC rests on two pillars: the conviction that today, more than ever, it is necessary to bridge the gap between the scholarly community and the general public, and the related belief that open access publishing is necessary to ethically reappropriate academic research from commercial publishers who restrict the free circulation of ideas.

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**‘Art must not be
concentrated in dead
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Vladimir Mayakovsky, 1918
(translated by Mikhail Anikst)



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Vladimir Mayakovsky, 1918
Translated by Mikhail Anikst

The Work of Arts

Aesthetics and Subaltern Politics in China

With these words, the great Soviet poet addressed the key question of how to bring art to people and people to art in a new world in which old aristocracies, elites, and their aesthetic privileges were fading away. In the words of art theorist Boris Groys, 'the world promised by the leaders of the October Revolution was not

merely supposed to be a more just one or one that would provide greater economic security, but it was also and in perhaps in even greater measure meant to be beautiful.' Walking in these steps, the Chinese Revolution was a project of further experimentation and creation in the realm of the relationship between art and the people. The world it created was at once utopian and disfigured, radiant and desolate. While today that world is no longer, the questions it raised about the relationship between the working class, artistic production, and aesthetic appreciation remain with us. This issue of the *Made in China Journal* offers a collection of essays that examine the 'work of arts', intended as the extension of art beyond the confines of the museum and into the spaces of ordinary life and production.

The special section is divided in two parts—'Proletarian Images' and 'Proletarian Words'. In 'Proletarian Images', **A. C. Baecker** examines how amateur art practice during the socialist period in China changed the class and labour relations that had previously defined the fine arts. **Tina Mai Chen** tracks the image of Lenin across Chinese film history to reveal different understandings of socialist internationalism and their eventual eclipse. **Wang Hui** interprets the critically-acclaimed *Phoenixes* of Chinese artist Xu Bing as a gesture of refusal in a world in which the symbols of revolution and political art have become fashionable and lucrative commodities. **Paola Voci** delves into the case of Dafen village's worker painters, the focus of many celebratory state-promoted narratives and, more critically, transnational media and academic attention. **Cai Qing** outlines a history of art performances both in China and the West characterised by violence done to the body. In 'Proletarian Words', **Benjamin Kindler** looks back to past literary debates to excavate a Maoist politics of 'life' as the grounds for a new, proletarian aesthetics and as a counterpoint to the biologisation of contemporary life. **Federico Picerni** digs into the literary production of Fan Yusu, a migrant worker who in 2017 became an overnight sensation in China after publishing her memoir

online. **Christian Sorace** reads migrant worker poetry alongside Marx as a critique of labour exploitation and as a genre of mourning for a lost future. **Christopher Connery** reflects on his experiences with the experimental theatre group Grass Stage and on the role of the latter in providing a social space for interrogating contemporary society. Finally, **Jingyi Wang** profiles folk-rock singer Li Zhi, who achieved widespread popularity before being banned for unknown reasons in April 2019.

This issue also includes a forum on the 'Enigmas of Chinese Capital' in which a group of scholars engage with Ching Kwan Lee's groundbreaking book *The Specter of Global China* from the perspective of their own research. Examining the case of the rubber industry in Laos, **Juliet Lu** extends Lee's work by examining the history of the Chinese state's commitment to securing access to resources it deems strategic, and how this structures firm-level approaches. **Aaron Halegua** draws from his work with Chinese construction workers in Saipan, a US territory in the Pacific, to consider the extent to which Lee's research on construction workers in Zambia resonates with other contexts. **Ruben Gonzalez-Vicente** suggests that Chinese infrastructural investment in the Caribbean represents a distinct form of capital when compared with local and transnational construction companies in the region, particularly when considering the broader societal and institutional frameworks accompanying such investment. Finally, **Yu Zheng** and **Chris Smith** challenge the theoretical approach of Lee's work through the lens of their research on Chinese multinational corporations in Europe.

The issue includes op-eds on the latest wave of anti-Asian racism in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak by **Gerald Roche** and on the latest trends in trade union reform in China by **Geoffrey Crothall**. In the China Columns section, **Bilal Zenab Ahmed** examines the ways in which Uyghur Islamic indigenous traditions have undergone 'creative destruction' through pressure from Beijing, and considers the potential for alternative traditions to form the

basis for collective resistance. **Judith Audin** adopts an ethnographic approach to describe the social dimension of the restructuring of the coal mining industry in Datong, an important coal cluster in Shanxi province. **Hui Xu** explores how the policy of industrial upgrading based on the extensive robotisation of the manufacturing sector pursued by the Chinese authorities is impacting labour relations in Chinese factories. **Robert Walker** and **Jane Miller** draw on recently-published research by Chinese scholars to explore the status of women in contemporary China. **Adam Liebman** and **Goeun Lee** look into the implementation of a controversial new garbage sorting system in Shanghai starting from 2019. Finally, **Zeng Jinyan** engages in a conversation with **Liu Shao-hua** about the dynamics and shortcomings of epidemic control in China.

In the Window on Asia section, **Angela Tritto** analyses the dynamics of Belt and Road-related investment in Indonesia, and in the cultural section **Anita Chan** reviews the hit Netflix documentary *American Factory*. We wrap up the issue with conversations with **Joel Andreas**, **Mark Frazier**, and **Timothy Grose** about their recently-published books.

We are happy to announce that starting from this issue, the *Made in China Journal* will be published three times a year in collaboration with ANU Press. This partnership is grounded in our joint belief in open access publishing and the free circulation of ideas, and aims to further our goal of bridging the gap between the scholarly community and the general public. ■

The Editors

BRIEFS

Jan-Apr 2020

JAN-APR 2020

Further Evidence of Forced Labour from Xinjiang

New worrying details about the situation in Xinjiang emerged in the first quarter of 2020. On 24 January 2020, state security detained Hui Muslim poet and author Cui Haoxin—also known by his pen name An Ran—in Jinan, Shandong province, accusing him of ‘picking quarrels and stirring up trouble’. Cui had emerged as a vocal critic of the government’s treatment of Muslim minorities, in particular in Xinjiang. Following two major leaks of official documents in November 2019 by *The New York Times* and the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, in January 2020 new documents detailing the surveillance and incarceration of hundreds of Muslim individuals from the Karakax region in Xinjiang were leaked. The documents describe how individuals charged with arbitrary violations—including praying at home, holding an unused passport, and having more children than permitted by the state—move through the mass detention system, from initial surveillance to internment and ‘graduation’. The release from detention camps, however, appears to be no less horrific. On 1 March 2020, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) released a report on the labour conditions of Uyghur and other ethnic minority individuals who were transferred from Xinjiang to factories across China. Between 2017 and 2019, ASPI estimates that at least 80,000 Uyghurs were relocated from Xinjiang to factories—including suppliers of well-known brands like Apple, Nike, Amazon, Samsung, Zara, H&M, Microsoft, Mercedes-Benz, Uniqlo, and more—where they work ‘under conditions that strongly suggest forced labour’. RZ

(Sources: ASPI; CNN 1; CNN 2; Financial Times; PEN America; Radio Free Asia; Quartz)

Unabated Repression in the Midst of the Coronavirus Crisis

The COVID-19 outbreak of early 2020 did not stop the persecution of activists in China. At the end of December 2019, Pastor Wang Yi—the founder of the Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu, one of the largest underground churches in China—was sentenced to nine years in prison for ‘inciting subversion of state power’ and ‘illegal operation of business’. Roughly at the same time, activist Zhang Baocheng, a former member of the New Citizens Movement arrested in Beijing in July 2019, was charged with ‘promoting terrorism and extremism’. On 26 December 2019, activists Zhang Zhongshun, Li Yingjun, and Dai Zhenya, and human rights lawyer Ding Jiaxi were arrested under the allegation of inciting subversion after joining a gathering in Xiamen. In the following days, more participants to the gathering were summoned, questioned, or temporarily detained. On 15 February 2020, legal academic and founder of the New Citizens Movement Xu Zhiyong was also arrested in Guangzhou for alleged subversion, while his partner Li Qiaochu was taken by the police in Beijing in the early hours of 16 February. On 16 March, the six lawyers of Cheng Yuan, Liu Dazhi, and Wu Gejianxiong—anti-discrimination activists arrested in Changsha in July 2019 for alleged subversion—were ‘dismissed’ by their clients. On 5 April, human rights lawyer Wang Quanzhang, detained since August 2015 for subversion, was released and immediately put under compulsory ‘14-day quarantine’ far away from his family. He was allowed to reunite with them in Beijing only on 27 April. Arbitrary detention not only threatens dissenting voices domestically. In February 2020, Swedish bookseller Gui Minhai was sentenced to ten years on the spurious charge of leaking state secrets abroad, while in April 2020 Canadian citizens Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor marked their 500th day in detention under unsubstantiated spying charges. AC

(Sources: Practice Source; South China Morning Post; The Guardian 1; The Guardian 2; The New York Times)

COVID-19 Outbreak

On 16 December 2019, a deliveryman working at the Huanan Seafood Market in Wuhan was admitted to the city's Central Hospital with pneumonia. Samples were sent to gene sequencing companies, and on 27 December health officials in Wuhan were told that the disease was being caused by a novel SARS-like coronavirus. On 30 December, ophthalmologist Li Wenliang and seven other doctors posted on social media about concerning symptoms in their patients: all were brought in for questioning and reprimanded. The following day, 27 new cases were confirmed and China informed the WHO about the new illness. In early to mid January, the Chinese central government became involved in the response while officially downplaying the seriousness. However, on 19 January Beijing sent its top epidemiologists to Wuhan, and by 23 January the city was put under lockdown, followed by a larger lockdown of the surrounding area the next day. On 6 February, the news that Li Wenliang had passed away due to the virus sparked widespread anger on Chinese social media. The next day several Chinese academics signed open letters demanding freedom of speech. Around this time a number of Chinese activists were also arrested or disappeared. Chen Qiushi, a human rights lawyer who had been reporting on the pandemic, was detained on 6 February. Fang Bin, a Wuhan businessman who had been documenting the crisis, was arrested on 9 February. Li Zehua, a Chinese citizen journalist and rapper, had been posting online videos documenting the situation in Wuhan before going missing on 26 February—he resurfaced only on 22 April. Ren Zhiqiang, an outspoken Chinese tycoon who had dared to circulate an essay critical of the Chinese leadership, disappeared in March and was then placed under investigation for 'serious violations of discipline and law'. Finally, on 19 April activists Cai Wei, his partner Tang, and Chen Mei were detained by police at an unknown location. They had helped to publish censored articles related to the virus on Github. ZZ

(Sources: Caixin 1; Caixin 2; Hong Kong Free Press; Quartz 1; Quartz 2; South China Morning Post; The Guardian)

Journalists under Assault as China Adopts Enhanced Censorship Rules

On 1 March, a new set of rules from the Cyberspace Administration of China imposed heightened restriction on online publishing, with the aim of encouraging 'positive' content while barring material deemed 'negative' or 'improper'. In recent months, the police campaign also expanded its reach overseas. In November 2019, Luo Daiqing, a Chinese student at the University of Minnesota, was sentenced to six months in prison for posting more than '40 comments denigrating a national leader's image and indecent pictures' while abroad. At the same time, the Chinese government and its proxies stepped up their attempts to control the discussion of China in foreign media. In January, the Chinese Embassy in Copenhagen demanded that the largest newspaper in Denmark, *Jyllands-Posten*, apologise for publishing an illustration of the Chinese flag depicting viruses replacing the stars. In February, Nepal's *The Kathmandu Post* faced similar wrath from the local Chinese Embassy over an image of a Chinese banknote with Mao wearing a mask. At the end of January, leading Swedish newspapers and broadcasters called for action against attacks and threats from Chinese diplomats. Foreign journalists in China have borne the brunt of the worsening climate. Following the publication on 3 February of an op-ed in *The Wall Street Journal* calling China the 'real sick man of Asia', three of the paper's Beijing-based journalists were expelled. The US government retaliated by announcing that the five major Chinese state-run media entities operating in the US would be treated the same as foreign embassies. In mid-March China revoked press credentials for all American journalists working for *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post*. Chinese nationals employed in China by these outlets were also dismissed. AC

(Sources: Axios; Bloomberg; Committee to Protect Journalists; Cyberspace Administration of China; Nepali Times; Radio Free Asia; The Guardian 1; The Guardian 2; The New York Times; The Wall Street Journal)

Increased Scrutiny of Academia

In the first quarter of 2020, Chinese and US authorities both stepped up their scrutiny of academia, ostensibly to tackle technology theft and espionage. On 28 January 2020, the US Department of Justice arrested Charles Lieber, chair of the Chemistry and Chemical Biology Department at Harvard University. Lieber—along with two Chinese researchers in Boston—was charged with lying about his links to China, in particular in relation to the Thousand Talents Plan, an initiative of the Chinese government aimed at recruiting specialists overseas. On 27 February, Anming Hu, an Associate Professor in the Department of Mechanical, Aerospace, and Biomedical Engineering at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville was arrested under charges of wire fraud and making false statements about his links to China. The DOJ accused Hu of violating federal law by concealing his affiliation with a Chinese university while receiving funding from NASA. Similarly, on 10 March, the DOJ arrested James Patrick Lewis, a former professor at the Physics Department of West Virginia University. Like Lieber, Lewis had entered into a contract with China's Thousand Talents Plan in 2017. He pleaded guilty to a federal fraud charge, admitting that he had convinced his institution to give him leave so that he could serve at the Chinese Academy of Sciences—an appointment which he had not disclosed. Technology theft is not the only worry. Academic freedom was felt to be at stake when, in February 2020, it was disclosed that the Free University of Berlin had signed a 500,000-euro contract with the Chinese Ministry of Education to set up a professorship for a new Chinese-teacher training programme. On the Chinese side, on 26 March, Chinese authorities detained Yuan Keqing, an historian at the Hokkaido University of Education in Japan, as part of a murky espionage investigation. RZ

(Sources: AP News; Inside Higher Ed; The Department of Justice 1; The Department of Justice 2; The Department of Justice 3; Reuters; South China Morning Post)

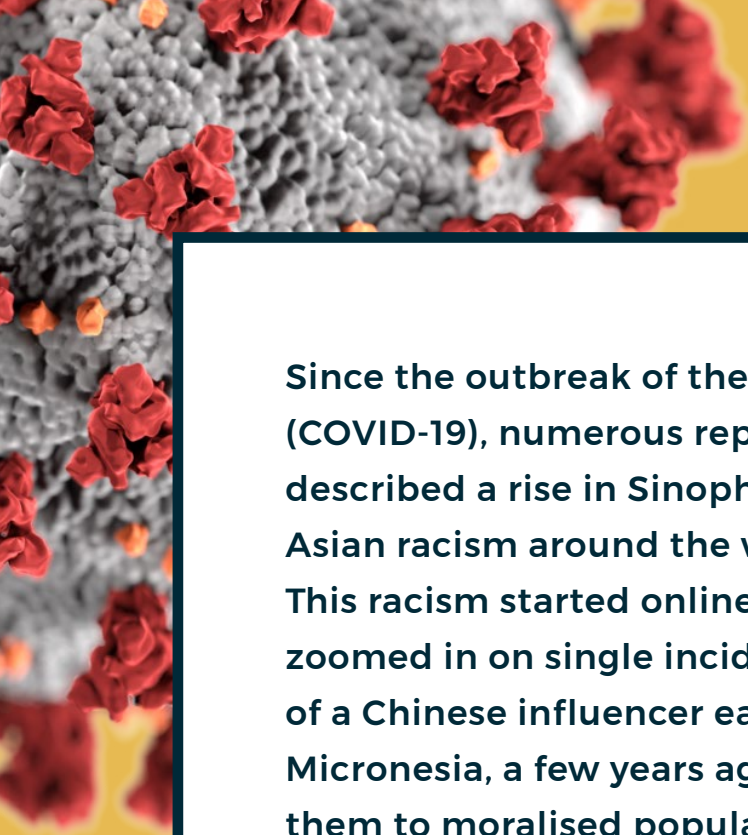
Renewed Assault on Hong Kong's Autonomy

The first quarter of 2020 has seen increased efforts by the Chinese Communist Party to curb Hong Kong's autonomy. On 15 April—China's 'National Security Education Day'—Luo Huining, head of the central government's liaison office in Hong Kong, released a message in which he urged the city to work together to oppose acts that threaten its stability. In particular, he lumped together the challenge posed by the pandemic and the civic unrest, urging the swift adoption of national security legislation. A previous attempt to draft a new national security law in 2003 was abandoned in the wake of mass protests. On 18 April, the Hong Kong police rounded up over a dozen veterans of the opposition camp for their involvement in unauthorised marches last year. Among the arrested were media tycoon Lai Chee-ying, lawyer Martin Lee Chu-ming, and trade union leader Lee Cheuk-yan. At the same time, the Hong Kong government took the unprecedented step of siding with the liaison office over its complaint that the filibustering tactics adopted by opposition lawmakers constituted a malicious breach of their duties. While in a statement released on 18 April the Hong Kong authorities mentioned that article 22 of the Basic Law bars the personnel of the liaison office from interfering in the city's affairs, in the following hours the statement was replaced by two new statements: one that specified that the liaison office is authorised by Beijing to have a 'special responsibility' in handling issues in Hong Kong, without any mention of Article 22; and another one saying that the liaison office does not even count as an office set up by Beijing in Hong Kong. According to legal scholar Jerome Cohen, such developments represent 'a stunning advance toward the Chinese Government's demolition of One Country, Two Systems in fact, if not in name.' IF

(Sources: Hong Kong Free Press; Jerome Cohen's Website; Reuters; South China Morning Post; The New York Times)

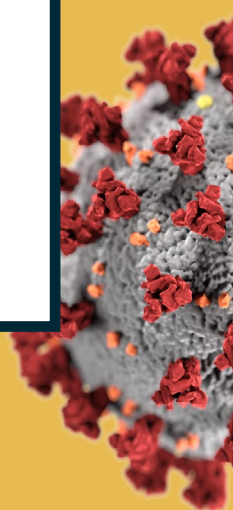


OP-EDS



Since the outbreak of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), numerous reports have described a rise in Sinophobia and anti-Asian racism around the world This racism started online. Commentators zoomed in on single incidents—like a video of a Chinese influencer eating a bat in Palau, Micronesia, a few years ago—and generalised them to moralised population traits and visions of cosmic retribution. This logic suggested that the virus was caused by disgusting eating habits and poor hygiene, and that people making these ‘lifestyle choices’ deserved to become sick, suffer, and die. How could so many people, unable to find Wuhan on a map and completely unqualified to make any claims about the origin and spread of viruses, feel so confident in making these judgements?

From Gerald Roche's op-ed
'The Epidemiology of Sinophobia'





A Cartoon of Victoria urging the Federation to get rid of the 'Chinese pest', from the *Melbourne Punch*, 10 May 1888.

The Epidemiology of Sinophobia

Gerald ROCHE

Since the outbreak of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), numerous reports have described a rise in Sinophobia and anti-Asian racism around the world, with occurrences being reported in Australia (Young 2020), France (BBC 2020), Canada (Miller 2020), and many other countries (Rich 2020).

This racism started online. Commentators zoomed in on single incidents—like a video of a Chinese influencer eating a bat in Palau, Micronesia, a few years ago—and generalised them to moralised population traits and visions of cosmic retribution. This logic suggested that the virus was caused by disgusting eating habits and poor hygiene, and that people making these 'lifestyle choices' deserved to become sick, suffer, and die. How could so many people, unable to find Wuhan on a map and completely unqualified to make any claims about the origin and spread of viruses, feel so confident in making these judgements?

In a 1985 article subtitled 'Towards an Epidemiology of Representations', the anthropologist Dan Sperber provides us with a way of better understanding this phenomenon. Sperber asks why some ideas circulate, and stick, better than others. His answer, in part, is that this happens because they are evocative. They resonate with, and bring to mind, other representations we are already familiar with.

So, when the images of bat-eating circulated online, they evoked pre-existing representations of Chinese people, and Asians in general. This enabled commentators to feel confident in claiming to understand the etiology of the virus and, in doing so, dismiss the suffering of the affected people while even suggesting they actually deserved it.

We might call the sum-total of these representations, which demote Asian lives to a plane of insignificance, 'white supremacy'.

We need to understand this broader context of white supremacy, and the way it has produced hostile indifference to people trapped in the virus outbreak, to appreciate why the reaction of some ‘China watchers’ (journalists, academics, and others), has been so problematic.

In response to the rising incidences of anti-Asian racism, these commentators have attempted to downplay or dismiss the significance of this phenomenon. Some have claimed that racism is not ‘the real issue,’ or have suggested that choosing to analyse and discuss Sinophobia is intellectually lazy. Others have claimed that denunciations of Sinophobia are only valid if they also denounce the harms of the Chinese state, such as the Xinjiang concentration camps.

None of these people deny the existence of Sinophobia, but they do dismiss its significance. We can therefore label their claims ‘implicatory denialism’, a term introduced by Stanley Cohen in the book *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering* (2013). Implicatory denialism, he states, does not involve the denial of facts, but ‘[w]hat are denied or minimized are the psychological, political, or moral implications that conventionally follow’ (Cohen 2013: 8).

Understanding why this sort of denialism is a problem does not require us to understand the motivations, intentions, or rationalisations of people who engage in implicatory denialism. Racism is structural, and so are its impacts. It does not matter what people intend, it matters what impact they have. So, we need to ask who this denialism harms and helps, and how.

To begin with, downplaying racism helps racists. In an atmosphere of pervasive white supremacy, racists love seeing people in positions of authority say that racism is not important. These statements act as a form of dog-whistle politics. Racists are emboldened by authority figures suggesting that people talk about race too much. And as the philosopher Jennifer Saul (2018) points out, these dog-whistle effects can occur whether it is the speaker’s intention or not.

In addition to empowering racists and contributing to an atmosphere of white supremacy, denialism impacts people who are targeted by Sinophobia. Responding to claims of racism with implicatory denialism sends a clear message that certain people’s lived experiences are not important. ‘Yes, you are suffering, but let’s focus on the REAL issue.’

Some people seem to understand that they are sending this message when they engage in implicatory denialism. To avoid the interpretation that they are wilfully compounding someone’s suffering, they may package their statements in

Responding to claims of racism with implicatory denialism sends a clear message that certain people’s lived experiences are not important. ‘Yes, you are suffering, but let’s focus on the REAL issue.’

Eduardo Bonillo-Silva, in his book *Racism Without Racists* (2018), provides a vivid description of the rhetorical contortions that are needed to maintain this view. At the centre of these rhetorical manoeuvres is denial; denying the existence or significance of racism is central to maintaining it.

formulations such as ‘I don’t mean to downplay anyone’s suffering but...’ Once again, Jennifer Saul (2019) provides us with a useful term to describe this pragmatic strategy: she calls it a ‘fig leaf’, capturing the way that it acts as woefully insufficient means of concealment.

We can further think about how statements of implicatory denialism harm targets of Sinophobia by comparing them to slurs, as described by Jane Hill in her book *The Everyday Language of White Racism* (2008). For both slurs and implicatory denialism, the impact of the speech acts comes from their historicity, not from speakers’ intentions. They evoke both a collective history of subordination *and* individual experiences of lived discrimination.

Like slurs, acts of denialism evoke a history. In this case, it is a history of other denials, of the sort used to uphold ‘colourblind racism’, which is the idea that racism is something that was overcome decades ago and has since ceased to exist as a meaningful social force. Eduardo Bonillo-Silva, in his book *Racism Without Racists* (2018), provides a vivid description of the rhetorical contortions that are needed to maintain this view. At the centre of these rhetorical manoeuvres is denial; denying the existence or significance of racism is central to maintaining it.

Therefore, reacting to accounts of Sinophobia with implicatory denialism not only negates the reality of racialised suffering, but also makes it clear that the commentator will allow that suffering to continue, by opposing anti-racist speech. This empowers racists, upholds white supremacy, and compounds the suffering of people facing Sinophobia.

We should do everything we can to stop the spread of coronavirus and to help alleviate the suffering of people who have contracted it. But we need to realise that for most of us, our capacity to do either thing will be limited. What we can do is intervene in the spread of Sinophobia and anti-Asian racism where we are, and in the contexts where our speech acts are heard and interpreted, and help alleviate the suffering of those around us. ■



PC: Bilaterals.com.

Trade Union Reform in China: An Assessment

Geoffrey CROTHALL

When Xi Jinping formally launched China's trade union reform initiative in November 2015, it was not exactly headline news (Workers' Daily 2017). The announcement, couched in typically impenetrable Party-speak, appeared to be just another vaguely-worded commitment to the reform process.

However, what China's trade unions do and, just as importantly, do *not* do can have a tremendous socioeconomic and political impact. If carried out effectively, the trade union reform initiative has the potential to benefit not just China's workers but also bolster the political legitimacy of the Communist Party—hence the push from the very top of the Party.

With an estimated 300 million members and one million full-time officials, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) is uniquely placed to help improve the pay and working conditions of China's workers. Up until now, however, it has singularly failed to do so. After four decades of economic reform, the majority of China's workers have yet to really benefit from the country's so-called 'economic miracle', while on the other hand a small number of Party and business leaders have become obscenely wealthy. Moreover, this extreme wealth inequality has actually worsened over the last five years, as China's fast-paced economy slows down and an ever-increasing number of workers are consigned to low-paid, precarious employment with little or no welfare benefits.

At the end of 2015, the Party leadership understood that there was a pressing need for the ACFTU to shake off its bureaucratic torpor and rededicate itself to helping workers obtain a fair share of the national wealth. The task was made even more urgent by the fact that the authorities were simultaneously cracking down on several civil society labour organisations in Guangdong that had actually been helping workers—in other words, doing the job the ACFTU should have been doing all along (Franceschini and Lin 2018).

Over the following years, the ACFTU claimed in an endless stream of speeches and policy documents that it had got the message. However, working conditions did not improve and

workers continued to stage thousands of strikes and collective protests each year over wage arrears, lay-offs, and unpaid social insurance contributions (Crothall 2018).

In the summer of 2018, China Labour Bulletin (CLB) decided to investigate just how effective the trade union reform initiative had been by talking directly to trade union officials on the ground rather than relying on the ACFTU's official pronouncements. As CLB Executive Director Han Dongfang explained: 'Instead of trying to prove once again that the ACFTU was useless and that the reform initiative was just another fake event, we wanted to use labour dispute cases in which workers were in urgent need of union representation to knock on the door of local unions and discuss whether or not they can act on the workers' behalf, if so how and if not, why not.'

From August 2018 to June 2019, we conducted about 250 telephone interviews with 95 local trade unions, based on 71 collective worker protests in 12 provinces. Initially, we would ask the officials whether or not they were aware of a specific labour dispute in their area and, if so, what had been their response to it; had they intervened to help the workers defend their rights, mediated in the dispute or sought to negotiate with the employer to resolve it, or had they simply ignored the workers' plight? The discussion could then broaden out to a critique of the union's performance and the difficulties officials had in organising workers, resolving labour disputes, and implementing the trade union reform agenda.

While some officials were suspicious and reluctant to talk, many were open to our inquiries and talked frankly about their own roles, their frustrations, and their hopes for improving the lives of workers.

This research formed the basis of a comprehensive report, which was published in December 2019 and subsequently sent to more than 100 trade union offices around the country for their comment (CLB 2019).

In essence, the main findings of the report were that although the ACFTU has made some efforts to help defend workers' rights since the onset of the reform initiative, enterprise unions remained far removed from the workers they were supposed to represent and trade union officials had little understanding of what genuine collective bargaining entailed, and spent most of their time on activities unrelated to the core mission of a trade union.

Collective bargaining, likewise, remained a largely formulaic exercise with officials concerned more with the number of collective agreements signed than the relevance of those agreements to the workers they were supposed to help.

Many local trade unions devoted more financial and human resources towards providing workers with legal advice and helping them defend their rights in disputes with their employer. This is a much-needed service given that China's labour arbitration and mediation committees handle more than a million complaints each year, according to official data from the National Bureau of Statistics. By the time of our investigation, most district- and county-level trade union federations had established worker service centres and rights protection hotlines, and responded positively to workers' requests for help. Some of the officials we talked to were clearly dedicated to the cause and saw themselves as genuine representatives of labour.

When it came to what should be the core activities of trade union officials, worker organising and collective bargaining, however, the results of our investigation were more disappointing. The ACFTU has acknowledged that employment conditions in China are changing and that there is a need to focus more on workers in the service and transport sector rather than the traditional manufacturing sector, which is now in decline. In April 2018, as part of the reform initiative, the ACFTU launched a new campaign designed to bring more transport and service workers into the union, concentrating on eight major groups: truck drivers, couriers, nursing staff, domestic staff, security guards, online food delivery workers, sales and real estate agents (Li and Deng 2018). In the following months, local unions proudly publicised how they had worked hard to bring the eight groups into the fold; however, they still followed the traditional model of setting up enterprise trade unions based on quotas established by higher-level unions rather than on the actual needs of workers on the ground. Moreover, many local union officials were constrained or frustrated in their efforts to recruit workers by the union's bureaucratic structure and rigid requirements of their superiors.

Collective bargaining, likewise, remained a largely formulaic exercise with officials concerned more with the number of collective agreements signed than the relevance of those agreements to the workers they were supposed to help. A veteran trade union official from Wuhan who we talked to was quite candid in his assessment of his own work in negotiating collective wage agreements in the construction industry. Wage levels were not the main concern of construction workers, he explained, rather work safety and the chronic problem of wage arrears were the main issues workers wanted to resolve. However, these grievances were never part of the collective bargaining process.

Nearly all trade union officials spend far too much time on government poverty relief efforts, educational and training programmes, helping with employment searches, even marriage introductions, and celebrating great craftsmen and model workers etc., tasks that should never be part of a trade union's core work. Poverty alleviation is one of Xi Jinping's most important crusades, and as such trade union officials in remote and poor districts of China have been recruited to make sure all poverty eradication targets are met by the end of 2020. This, of course, diverts resources away from helping workers in those areas resolve disputes with their employer and improve their working conditions.

It became clear from our interviews with trade union officials that a lot of the ACFTU's problems stemmed from its over-bureaucratic, hierarchical structure and reliance on orders from above.

To resolve this deep-seated problem, the report recommended a complete overhaul of the ACFTU's organisational structure that would place industrial and sectoral trade unions at its core. These sectoral unions would reflect local employment conditions so that regions with a high concentration of garment factories, for example, would have a garment workers' union, while urban centres would have more service sector and white collar unions. Nearly all districts would have construction and transport worker unions. These sectoral unions would eventually replace the current provincial, municipal, and district trade union federations that are in essence just an adjunct of the local Party and government. Staff from those federation offices would be redeployed to the sectoral union best suited to their capabilities.

Once in place, sectoral unions would be able to develop collective bargaining strategies specifically tailored to the needs of their members. The report outlined what some of these strategies might look like for the construction industry and transport sector. In the construction industry, the report suggested building a database of all workers that would not only help the union negotiate appropriate collective agreements that included pay levels, working hours, social insurance, work safety, etc., but would also allow the union to offer skills training and match specific workers to employment opportunities in individual construction projects in their region.

Another vital area of reform identified by the report is the need for union officials to reposition themselves as representatives of, and advocates for, workers, and abandon their current role as propagandists for the Communist Party.

Once in place, sectoral unions would be able to develop collective bargaining strategies specifically tailored to the needs of their members.

The report stressed that enterprise union officials must be part of, and democratically elected by, the workforce, and should be imbued with socialist values so as to effectively combat the corporate greed and lawlessness that currently pervades much of the private sector in China.

Finally, the report made a very concrete recommendation that the ACFTU should establish a comprehensive online presence in one general website that lists the contact information for all regional and sectoral trade unions across the country, as well as the names and profiles of the relevant officials. This would enable workers and union members to quickly identify and contact the trade union most suitable for their needs and most likely to resolve their grievances. Currently, each local union has its own (usually poorly maintained) website or Weibo/WeChat account which appears to be completely disconnected from other unions.

Going forward, CLB will continue to monitor and report on the progress of China's trade union reform. In the coming months, we will focus in particular on how union officials are responding to labour disputes in the construction and transport sectors, as well as what the union is doing to help workers during the COVID-19 outbreak.

While there is no guarantee that officials in the ACFTU will listen to our proposals, it is vital that we keep applying pressure. As Han Dongfang noted: 'We need to keep trade union officials' feet to the fire so that they can either choose to keep rejecting workers' demands for representation or start learning how to act as a real union.' ■



CHINA COLUMNS





Revolution and State Formation as Oasis Storytelling in Xinjiang

Afaq Khoja Mausoleum
Reconstruction.
PC: @rcmar, Flickr.com.

Bilal Zenab AHMED

Beijing has reacted to Uyghur spirituality and ethnic distinctiveness with a strongly assimilationist policy aimed at creating a new kind of post-communist and post-Islamic society. This essay examines the ways in which Uyghur Islamic indigenous traditions have undergone 'creative destruction' through pressure from Beijing, and considers the potential for alternative traditions, such as mythic storytelling, to form the basis for collective resistance.

No one can say that the world is ignoring Xinjiang. In October, at the American Association of Christian Counselors, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo likened China's treatment of over a million Uyghur Muslims in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region to George Orwell's 1984 (Reuters 2019). This was at the same time that the Trump White House began placing sanctions on Chinese governmental and business organisations involved with the now

infamous reeducation camps in the region. China has been condemned by representatives from over 20 countries, with the notable exceptions of Muslim-majority states that have important trading relationships with Beijing such as Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Iran, and Iraq (The Guardian 2019; Shams 2019; Kerimkhanov 2019; Zhen 2019; Calabrese 2019).

Yet, in the current political climate, with the United States and China engaged in a protracted trade war and the War on Terror evolving into rapidly-intensifying Islamophobia and the use of concentration camps the world over, important details about Chinese objectives in Xinjiang have been poorly discussed in mass media. Academics, journalists, and politicians are right in noting that Beijing is using the camps as a tool for social reengineering, in order to force Xinjiang's 'integration' into the Chinese political and cultural mainstream. Nevertheless, this analysis, while correct, risks overlooking long-term economic goals in the region, most notably Xinjiang's importance to the Belt and Road Initiative, as well as the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) existential opposition to the ideological threat of Uyghur ethnic, cultural, and spiritual distinctiveness. Ultimately, what is often left out is that the CCP's social engineering appears to be creating a new kind of post-communist and post-Islamic society in Xinjiang that will likely be on the cutting edge of similar pushes for mass surveillance and ethnic cleansing all over the world.

The New Frontier

First, it will be useful to give a brief overview of Xinjiang. Xinjiang literally means 'New Border' or 'New Frontier', and indicates a territory that was conquered by an expanding Qing Dynasty in the 1760s. The region is about one sixth of China's total land area and includes 5,600 kilometres of international borders with eight countries, including Russia, several former Soviet republics in Central Asia,

Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan. Xinjiang has two distinct subregions: Dzungaria, which is north of the Tianshan Mountains, and the Tarim Basin, which is largely a desert to its south. The vast majority of Uyghurs live in the Tarim Basin, which has half a dozen major cities on the edges of the Taklamakan Desert (hence the Turkic name 'Altishahr', which means 'Six Cities' and will be used in the possessive throughout this article as a synonym for indigeneity). After the Chinese Revolution in 1949, ten ethnic groups were classified as 'Muslim' minorities, including the Uyghurs in Xinjiang.

Prior to the Qing Dynasty, the Altishahri economy prospered from complex trading networks on the Silk Road, with merchant commerce reinforcing highly cosmopolitan and only loosely hierarchical readings of Central Asian Sufism that are difficult to assimilate into modern state institutions without alteration. Following the Qing Dynasty's conquest, local rulers led frequent revolts against Beijing, during a period of Chinese expansion, population growth, and prosperity that would start to decline shortly before the Opium Wars. It was the violent suppression of these revolts that began to shift ruling-class attitudes towards Muslims in China, and Uyghurs in particular. The region's Muslims were treated with hostility during the Republican era (1911 to 1949), and particularly so due to continued violence from loyalist Muslim members of the Kuomintang, who fought in China's western provinces throughout the 1950s (Jacobs 2016).

Apart from its geopolitical significance, Xinjiang has been cultivated as a major food production centre in China, serving as the country's second-largest pastureland (including major sheep farming and wool production), and its largest growing base for cotton, hops, lavender, as well as other important crops. Xinjiang is also rich in energy resources, with the country's largest oil, natural gas, and coal reserves, in addition to 130 different kinds of minerals. Many of these resources are being exploited by the *bingtuan* which is shorthand for the Xinjiang

Production and Development Corps (Yi 2019). While the *bingtuan* employs about 12 percent of Xinjiang's population, its workforce is over 80 percent Han Chinese. The *bingtuan* has been operating since 1954 as a paramilitary-development organisation, and directly reports to Beijing, rather than the local government. While its original objectives were to ensure the settlement of Han Chinese immigrants, to change the province's demographic balance, to maintain security internally and along international borders, and to project the power of the 'centre', the *bingtuan* has developed a complex multi-sector economy based on food and agriculture. The *bingtuan* also controls important technological, cultural, health, and judicial infrastructure, and in many cases actually built it.

Many of today's problems in Xinjiang were severely exacerbated by Beijing's Open Up the West Campaign (西部大开发) in the 1990s, which aimed to increase Han Chinese immigration to Xinjiang through a system of economic and social incentives. It was in the 1990s that the CCP first began to promote moving to Xinjiang based on a rhetoric of ethnic unity, national integrity and stability, religious activities being opposed to the state, and anti-separatism, among other things. The Campaign resulted in huge wage and labour gaps between Han Chinese and Uyghurs and other local minorities, especially in the professional and managerial class. Uneven access to state institutions and jobs created, and then reinforced, spatial divisions in cities, worsening ethnic apartheid and gaps in living standards. Since the 1990s, China has adopted a policy of 'creative destruction', whereby it destroys cultural religious sites, but also funds educational, religious, and tourist infrastructure in order to integrate the non-threatening remnants of 'Altishahri' indigeneity. Global outcry has tended to focus on the more destructive parts of Beijing's approach, for understandable reasons, but this ignores how the CCP is simultaneously creating a new kind of post-communist and

post-Islamic society in Xinjiang that is driven as much by technological advances as its own conventional and managerial worldview.

Altishahri Integration

While Beijing often accuses Uyghur political agitators of separatism (though it has steadily updated this rhetoric to be more about 'fighting terrorism' over the past 20 years), 'separatism' as a term is very reductive and does not fit the complexity of Altishahri spiritual and political thought. Indeed, its unique reading of Islam, legends, and history, reflects a dynamic cosmopolitanism produced in part by Silk Road merchant commerce that is often hard to define for bureaucratic and managerial purposes. This is largely the reason that 'Islam' often means so many different things with respect to the Uyghurs. It is not common to hear Beijing, or workers in the *bingtuan*, label anything from language to ethnicity to diverse spiritual rituals as 'Islamic'. Xinjiang is a unique context with multiple sources of Muslimness, and seemingly 'non-Islamic' markers like the Turkic language that are nevertheless attached to Islam in popular and institutional consciousness. It is important to fully appreciate this cosmology and understand it within the local context rather than from the standpoint of conservative and statist ideologies—if only to avoid unintentionally reinforcing the CCP's efforts to brand 'Uyghur' as a neatly bounded identity that is essentialised for administrative and bureaucratic ease. Indeed, even Uyghur exiles and political activists risk adopting the language of separatism, nationalism, and even Islamism, in a manner that reshapes local understandings of politics and struggle while sidelining a properly Altishahri approach.

Altishahri ideas about resistance are rooted in a blend of Silk Road cultural traditions shaped by the active veneration of Sufi saints and community-authored manuscripts. It is this tradition that China seeks to crush in



Kashgar, a modern Uyghur residential area can be spotted through a partially demolished wall.
PC: @choongching, Flickr.com.

favour of ideas that are more compatible with a centrally-managed approach to religion and identity. Altishahri resistance is heavily influenced by Sufi Naqshbandi Islamic orders that arose in Central Asia in the fourteenth century, with Semitic, Iranic, and Turkic influences (Thum 2014). By the 1930s, this mixture became roughly equal to a 'Uyghur' identity strongly affected by Sufi cosmology. Traditionally, local history is taught at the tombs of important figures ('shrines') where *shaykhs* tell pilgrims different stories and tales about them. This storytelling has a great deal of spiritual legitimacy, often because it is literally on the same ground that the figures walked. There are also political consequences, because

when pilgrims go to the shrines, and remember these figures, they go over the historical record and meditate on the 'higher' values associated with them. This puts them in the position of noting the gap between these values, such as freedom and justice, and the world around them, which can potentially lead to utopian thinking that is represented in the memory of the figures themselves. Important manuscripts, written by the local community, also encourage utopian thinking in a similar process. It is useful to consider Altishahri thought as a kind of 'active mysticism' through which meditation and worship starts to blend with political activity, without strict distinctions between the secular and religious.

It is important to distinguish ‘active mysticism’ from the kinds of mysticism with which Western observers are normally familiar, which is seen as something a worshipper does in withdrawal and isolation from the rest of the world. Indeed, while local Islamic practice does contain these forms, mysticism can also mean a variety of activities that are explicitly rooted in the ways one deals with society. Mysticism is not only about one’s personal spiritual needs outside of the community. It is also explicitly about how those needs are expressed through interactions with the community (which is what makes it ‘active’). Worship can take many different forms, only one of which is private apolitical meditation. In Xinjiang, one person may tell a tale about a Sufi mystic, at their shrine, with that storytelling being an expression of worship in a similar way to a pilgrim hearing that tale. More radically, a pilgrim may hear that tale and be inspired to interact with the community in ways that correspond to the spiritual themes of the story. Such actions could be anything from marrying a suitable partner and treating one’s elderly relatives with respect, to giving money to the poor and waging armed struggle against the Chinese state.

Beijing has shut down shrines and ended Uyghur Islamic practice, but also reshaped activities at other shrines and inserted itself into the regulation of manuscripts, because it is threatened by the political ramifications of this active mysticism. It coopts local spirituality by controlling the *shaykhs* that lead it and emphasising the kind of storytelling that gives rise to forms of community interaction more aligned with its strategic objectives in the region. As a result, Beijing effectively positions itself to rearticulate the local transmission of knowledge and spirituality, with a significant impact on its political landscape. It is like changing the textbooks that students use to make them think a certain way.

Rian Thum (2012) explains this process through the example of Afaq Khojah. Afaq was the founder of a line of rebellious Sufi leaders in the seventeenth century, and over

the past three centuries, narratives about the man have been occasionally reshaped based on changing politics and shifting definitions of what is considered properly ‘local’ to Xinjiang. Starting in the 1930s, Afaq’s tale was reconfigured as an ethno-national history of rebellion and independence from China, which is often portrayed as a ‘distant city’ in the manuscript tradition of Naqshbandi *maqthe*. Beijing has made dramatic changes to how Afaq is understood, whether in the manuscripts themselves (CCP officials confiscate or destroy copies of the popular historical novel *Afaq Khoja*) or the oasis history that pilgrims hear about at his shrine. Indeed, CCP-appointed shaykhs and the local tourist industry tend to place more emphasis on his descendant Xiang Fei (香妃) who is also buried at his shrine and was known as the ‘fragrant concubine’. Legend has it that the Qianglong Emperor was so enamoured with her beauty that he brought her from Xinjiang to be a consort at the Royal Court. Effectively, therefore, rather than values of liberation and resistance associated with the story of Afaq Khojah, pilgrims and tourists now learn to value the Han-Uyghur cultural fusion at the core of this romance. As such, the shrine has largely been neutralised, with the role of gender in reconfiguring the spiritual tale being particularly significant, since the Uyghurs are now represented by a passive and seductive female who captures the Emperor’s benevolent attention, rather than her male ancestor who violently pushed back against Chinese empire.

Clearly, the takeaway is that Uyghurs need to be seen and not heard. They are allowed to be exotified by middle class tourists but can never be political subjects in their own right. As Afaq’s tale and shrine has always been reformulated based on changing political and economic forces, it has now morphed in respect to Beijing’s new regional and global ambitions. For their part, Chinese officials often say that they are attempting to guard Xinjiang from foreign influence, and are seeking to prevent Islamic extremism. Yet, the reality is that Beijing often seeks to redesign Uyghur Islam in order to make it more compatible with the

needs of modern China. Prominent Uyghur activists, as well as international observers, often participate in this redesign by simplifying Altishahri resistance as separatism by a culturally distinct population, a nationalistic backlash to human rights violations, or an internal problem of Islamic extremism and terrorism. These interpretations of the province's cultural and political landscape are often more about the observers and their needs to impose certain historical and geopolitical narratives on the situation. Ultimately, it is the Uyghurs that lose out the most, as Altishahri cosmology is largely deleted and reorganised to fit within the authoritarian requirements of China's emerging imperial model.

Communism as Forced Baptism

Integration is necessarily a process of deletion and substitution as the target population is shaped to be more manageable by the ruling class. The War on Terror has created a global climate where Muslim minorities face unprecedented scrutiny—including in long-established democracies like France, the United States, and the United Kingdom—and where government agencies root out 'extremists' and appeal to moderate Muslims that profess loyalty to the state. Yet, it would be misleading to characterise Beijing's conduct as the latest chapter in a period of worldwide Islamophobia. Rather, the integration of Xinjiang is a heavy-handed push to wipe out all but a sliver of the Altishahri backdrop that preceded the current period, while leaving fragments that can be assimilated into state administration (in addition to important tourist and cultural production industries in the province).

Similar to other post-communist states, China does not ban Islam outright. Indeed, such a move would be counterproductive, given its ambitions as a world actor and strategic partnerships with majority-Muslim countries. Instead, Beijing pushes to create a distinctly

'Chinese Islam' that trims perceived Altishahri excess, at the same time as wiping out the basis for its independent existence as a societal form. Xinjiang's surveillance and concentration camp infrastructure serves both purposes—simultaneously crushing and reorganising the Uyghurs—in order to create a new human landscape in the area. While not anti-Muslim, this landscape will confine Islamic practice to a few tolerated spaces and forms, with a new, implicitly Han Chinese and CCP-controlled, secular culture dominating the region.

Since 2017, as many as 1.5 million Uyghur Muslims (out of a population of about 11 million) have moved through holding cells in the Xinjiang prison system before being handed long sentences or indefinite internment in concentration camps that push 'transformation through education'. The camps effectively function as medium-security prisons, with 'vocational training' that seems directed at teaching Uyghurs to disavow Islam and embrace secular allegiance to Beijing. Since there is no clear definition of what 'Islam' even means with respect to the Uyghurs, the word 'allegiance' should be understood as a euphemism for the forced adoption of irreligion under duress. When the CCP, or institutions linked to Beijing, speak of 'integration' and 'fundamentalism', they are referring to this process of rooting out beliefs and practices. The approach parallels that of other major powers in previous centuries, with the notable addition of huge technological advances.

Darren Byler recently spoke at Left Forum 2019 and cited a spokesperson of Leon Technology—an IT company providing services to the government in Xinjiang—to show how this tension means that a racialised desire for control gets projected on the issue. Byler said that the spokesperson, who was at the Ürümqi security trade fair in 2017, noted: 'Anyone who has been to Kashgar will know that the atmosphere there was really thick and imposing.' The words 'thick' and 'imposing' mean 'Uyghur' in this context, and Leon Technology was building an AI project to learn

from this ‘thick and imposing atmosphere’, to make it more manageable and legible to Beijing. Indeed, the spokesperson went on to say: ‘Through the continuous advancement of the project, we have a network of 10,000 video access points in the surrounding rural (Kashgar) area, which will generate massive amounts of video. This many images will bind many people.’ It is difficult not to see what is really going on.

Leon Technology is one of many firms working with Beijing in the mass surveillance and incarceration projects that have been set up in Xinjiang at an accelerated rate since the declaration of the People’s War on Terror in 2014. Reports from camps themselves, officially called ‘Vocational Education and Training Centres’, often shock audiences with descriptions of how Beijing’s goals are enforced by state-of-the-art technology. TV monitors are used to deliver the state curriculum in cells and classrooms, while detainees are closely monitored. They are disciplined via speaker systems if they sleep at the wrong times, express what are seen to be Islamic traditions, speak Uyghur, or otherwise behave ‘improperly’. Technology is also used to terrorise the Uyghurs outside of the camps, with transnational corporations like Google, Huawei, Facebook, and Hikvision interlinking with venture capitalists from the major powers (including the United States) to build a sprawling AI-based policing infrastructure for the Chinese state. Millions of people in the region are now subjected to smartphone scans, wiretaps, location tracking, and regular 3D facial and voice scans at local police stations that create biometric databases for Chinese intelligence agencies. It is very likely that as Xi Jinping pushes China towards becoming a ‘cyber superpower’, the slow erasure and rewriting of Uyghur Islamic practice will be touted as a pioneering victory for social control to be repeated elsewhere.

Towards a New Altishahri Resistance

While this particular combination of mass incarceration, the tech sector, ethnic erasure, and discussions of Islamic terrorism and extremism, may seem new, it relies on a classical imperial push for difference being controlled and neutralised that has led to concentration camps in every other major power. Indeed, there is not much difference, in terms of state behaviour, between China’s behaviour in Xinjiang, and the Spanish Empire’s in Cuba, the British Empire’s in South Africa, and so on. The history of concentration camps is one of societal anxieties leading to undesirable populations being caged and then stripped away of what is said to make them threatening. As China builds the military and trading infrastructure to compete with the world’s richest countries, it is also building its equivalents of migrant detention centres on the Australasian, European, and US–Mexico borders and colonial prisons in Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay, and Bagram Air Base. The danger is that this is just the beginning, and these versions of the authoritarian policing technology being used in Xinjiang will eventually be exported throughout the Belt and Road Initiative, whether in northwest Pakistan or eastern Europe. This is entirely possible, despite Beijing facing a torrent of popular criticism and international pushback due to its policies in western China.

Beijing is in the process of creating a new kind of Xinjiang, in which Uyghur cultural, spiritual, and political expression is severely limited and placed below the needs of a new secular (and multicultural) polity. While it is tempting to believe that oppression of the Uyghurs will limit its ambitions, particularly considering international outcry, the reality is likely to be that Chinese internal imperialism and social reengineering will mark the beginning of a new phase of capitalist governance. Certainly, the

technology being used in Xinjiang will become more widespread, but the same goes for the way that local culture and distinctiveness is being destroyed and violently brought in line with the CCP's top-down ideas about manageability and social control. One could argue that the techniques on display in Xinjiang are more refined versions of tactics initially fine-tuned during European imperialism, with particularly fruitful comparisons being possible with the settlement of the Americas. Obviously, the question of genocide and population settlement is different in the two cases, but the shared point is a new world being built on the colonial frontier that erases its indigenous precursors and serves as an exemplar for future governance.

Left-wing observers of Xinjiang have the chance to use Beijing's oppressive policies as an excuse to reevaluate Uyghur spiritual and cultural material as a source of political resistance, including outside of the region itself. This will likely be a prolonged process done in conjunction with Uyghur scholars, and risks being counterproductive due to how academic and governmental requirements are likely to reshape Altishahri consciousness as well. As Xinjiang goes global, it is unlikely that one will find a pure form of the complex societal medley that emerged from Silk Road trading across Central Asia. Nevertheless, it is certainly possible to appreciate how the Uyghurs may continue to be subjects of their own history, inspired by the manuscripts, oasis storytelling, and 'active mysticism' that alarms Beijing and the CCP. Certainly, this is a helpful approach to countering the War on Terror in general, as David Brophy (2019) has written with reference to the simplified rhetoric of 'Good Muslim' and 'Bad Muslim'. Yet even beyond the need for Uyghur agency, as Brophy writes, it is worth considering that Altishahri resistance in the future can be a source of inspiration for resistance against state authoritarian models. Indeed, its reliance on storytelling and religious activity in the

mold of Islamic Neoplatonist philosophy is far more likely to hit mass appeal in several Belt and Road countries (especially Pakistan) than established left-wing traditions. It is a question of exploring Altishahri thinking as something that has value outside of museums, tourism, and the niche interests of academics—as a source of political understanding that regards history to be mythic and inspirational, and storytelling to be on the same plane as large-scale insurrection. ■



The Coal Transition in Datong

An Ethnographic Perspective

One of Tongmei's historical mines. Datong, February 2016. PC: Judith Audin.

Judith AUDIN

The city of Datong, Shanxi province, has long been known as the 'coal capital' of China. Through an ethnographic approach based on long-term observation and in-depth interviews conducted over several years, this essay examines how the restructuring of the local coal industry in the reform era has impacted the living and working conditions of the miners in the area.

Coal is the only sector we are good at. Here in Shanxi, the transition will be difficult, and it will take time too.

Interview with a Tongmei employee, Datong, 1 June 2016

Building a new Tongmei, inventing a new life. Tongmei slogan, April 2016

The coal industry represents a key sector for China's national economy and employment, and it is the country's main source of energy. Coal

extraction has fuelled China's industrialisation and urbanisation throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century, especially after the liberalisation of coal production in 1979. In the reform era, the coal industry rapidly moved towards the market economy, oscillating along boom-and-bust cycles. After 2001, when China joined the World Trade Organisation, the new orientation towards a 'socialist market economy' driven by foreign direct investment triggered faster economic growth and rising living standards, as well as rising demand for coal production. Research in environmental studies, geography, and political economy has documented how the coal industry developed in China (Rui 2003; Wright 2012; Ho and Yang 2019). Since the mid 2000s, and more importantly since 2013, the coal sector has been restructured at the national level, following a new geography of production, and new measures aimed at 'de-capacity' (去产能) in the context of the promotion of new energies, as well as plans for 'low-carbon' and 'sustainable' development of 'resource-based cities' (资源性城市) (State Council 2013; Woodworth 2015).

While labour sociologists have extensively documented two ideal-types of the Chinese working class—laid-off workers in state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in Northeast China and migrant workers in the 'world factory' (Lee 2007)—workers and communities of the Chinese coal industry have been overlooked. This lack of attention is unwarranted considering how the industry of coal extraction not only shapes territories, but also communities of workers whose livelihoods rely heavily on 'black gold' (乌金). Understanding coal contexts in contemporary China through an ethnographic lens illuminates the complexity of coal reform by examining embedded social processes. The underpinning idea is that coal, as a material, generates particular economies and infrastructures of extraction. It interacts with different scales of political power, producing specific histories, geographies, economies, and social and political systems that span from the local to international levels (Mitchell 2011). Because the material is extracted in situ, often

in remote locations, the coal industry sustains specific, territorialised communities and social groups, and is at the core of local politico-economic systems in 'resource peripheries' (Hayter, Barnes, and Bradshaw 2003). Moreover, coal production, as a destructive industry, affects, undermines, and damages not only the environment through air pollution and land and water degradation, but also the people living in such places due to deadly accidents, respiratory diseases, and birth defects.

This essay aims to contribute to the sociology of coal mining in China by studying the social dimension of such profound restructuring in the city of Datong, an important coal cluster in the Jinbei (晋北) coal field. The article is based on long-term observation and in-depth interviews conducted in Datong from October 2015 until June 2019. Overall, this ethnographic approach 'from below' allows us to better understand the work and living conditions of coal miners, going beyond a simple image of hard labour and damaged landscapes.

Spatialities of Coal

Coal is embedded in *temporalities*—growth in boom and bust cycles—and in *spatialities*—the 'spatial system of the mine' (Baudelle 1994). Coal communities are closely connected to their territories of production, which are historically situated. Within the coal sector, my field research confirms that there are significant fractures in the identities of miners, between private and state-owned mines, between official employees (职工) and part-time employees (临时工), as well as between local and migrant workers. There are also differences in terms of systems of production—shaft mines, which is conducted through the excavation of a vertical or near-vertical tunnel from the top down, and open-cast mines where coal is extracted from an open pit—and coal regions, from Inner Mongolia, Shanxi, and Shaanxi to Sichuan, Jiangxi, Anhui, or Heilongjiang. By favouring selected coal

regions along the Inner Mongolia–Shanxi–Shaanxi axis while excluding others, the current politics of the coal sector also greatly affects the workers’ futures, shaping fulfilled and unfulfilled expectations (Ferguson 1999; Woodworth 2015).

The sensorial experiences of coal miners also depend on the local landscapes. For instance, Zhang Keliang, a miner-poet from Anhui province, described coal mining in his hometown in these words:

The sacrificed earth has exposed its hollow core

Masses of land cave in constantly

Creating a time-transcending hole

Leaving behind a bottomless pit of rain

Like a limpid teardrop, big enough to fill the most bitter sea

Quietly washing away the dirt and desolation of this world.

(From the poem ‘Sinkholes Lakes’, see video in Yu, Chen, and Lau 2018)

The topography of coal in Shanxi shows profound differences with Anhui, as described, for instance, in this collection of stories about one of Datong’s early mines, Xinzhouyao (忻州窑):

Xinzhouyao is the entrance gate on the western side of Datong. Two mountains oppose each other, forming a small excavation in the middle. Without the high-rise pit derrick and vehicles moving across, it would resemble one of the most common geological landscapes in northern Shanxi: on one side, there is an accumulation of yellow earth piled up for thousands of years; on the other, a mountain cliff stands tall; unknown wild grass grows over the mountain edge, and the wild wind continuously blows from all directions. (Zhou, Wen, and Tao 2009, 1, translated by the author)

The landscapes of Shanxi province, with the dry, yellow land of the Loess plateau, contrast with the rain-filled holes of Anhui.

Shanxi has been one of the core territories for coal production in China since the onset of Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms. To this day, Shanxi and Inner Mongolia remain the largest coal producers in China. At the same time, the industry has left deep ‘scars’ on both people and places in the province, producing labour victims as well as ‘environmental refugees’ (生态难民) (Zhang 2013). In 2015, the coal-mining industry employed a significant proportion of the working population in the province, with Datong, nicknamed China’s ‘coal capital’ (煤都), holding a symbolic position as a ‘resource-based city’ relying on a single industry.

Datong’s mining district is located 12.5 kilometres southwest of the city centre. Densely-urbanised areas established along the coal railway give way to smaller villages spread along a river that has almost dried out, on sandy land and hills. At the centre of the mining district, Datong Coal Mine Group—hereafter Tongmei, the SOE that replaced the original Mining Bureau established in 1949—stands out as an important landmark for the city, both symbolically and physically. While specialising in coal mining and power, more recently Tongmei has begun dabbling in renewable energy, real estate, and cultural tourism. As we will see, along with the Datong city government, the company has been exerting a strong influence on the local territory and economy.

Temporalities of Coal

Roger Thompson highlights the specific historical trajectory of coal in Shanxi, starting from the early report of geologist and geographer Baron Richthofen, who wrote in 1870 that Shanxi ‘is one of the most remarkable coal and iron regions in the world’, and continuing to the early twentieth century, when Shanxi’s coal became a symbol of local,

provincial, and national unity (Thompson 2011, 1262). In terms of production, unlike northeastern provinces such as Liaoning, Shanxi was not historically at the core of the coal industry in China in the early twentieth century (Wright 1984, 86–91), but rather developed rapidly in the 1930s. From 1937, under the Japanese military occupation, Datong turned into a new centre of coal production. In national history, the local coal industry is associated with forced labour and local Chinese miners are looked upon as martyrs and heroes of the resistance. In one of Datong's earliest mines, Meiyukou (煤峪口), the memorial of the 'hole of the ten thousand people' (万人坑) commemorates this history of mass graves. The Jinhuagong Coal Mine Museum (晋华宫国家矿山公园) also celebrates local resistance, for instance by commemorating a strike that took place in 1941 at the Baidong (白洞) coal mine. However, my interviews with the miners go beyond the narratives of heroes and victims, with interviewees often mentioning with relative pride the early development of the local mining industry by Japan as a symbol of modern infrastructure and engineering.

During the Mao era, the Chinese coal industry was nationalised and almost all the coal was produced by state-owned mines. In Datong, in 1949 the Communist authorities established a new Mining Bureau (矿务局), which the following year controlled eight mines and one power station with a total of 3,000 workers (Gao and Song 1994, 6). After the launch of the economic reforms in the late 1970s, the coal industry produced profound transformations in the local geographical, political, and social structures as the coalfields provided new sources of income and new employment opportunities, reshaping the territories through the industrialisation of rural areas and the urbanisation of remote regions. In 1983, a new national policy allowed small-scale coal mines to develop under the principle that 'Large, medium, and small coal mines should develop simultaneously' (大中小煤矿并举). The policy officially called for 'letting water flow as fast as possible' (有水快

流). Because of the uncertainty of the policies related to coal mines during the Mao era, mine operators seized on this opportunity, as they were not convinced it would last (Zhao and Xu 2012, 21). This initiated the diversification of local mines. At the end of 1990, 287 'local' coal mines were reported in Datong, classified in no less than nine different categories (Datong Statistical Yearbook 1991, 156). According to sociological research and to my interviews with local farmers, the coal production in Shanxi disrupted and dominated the land originally used for agricultural purposes (Zhang 2013).

In 1997, the Asian financial crisis resulted in a five-year slowdown of the coal economy and led the national authorities to launch a new policy to 'close the illegal and irrationally-distributed coal mines' (关闭非法和布局不合理煤矿) (State Council 1998). In an attempt to regulate the coal sector, governments at different levels tried to limit the number of private and collective coal mines. However, the implementation of this reform encountered serious obstacles, such as the resistance of local governments and officials worrying about the impact of such closures on the local GDP, as well as on mine owners (Wright 2007). Resistance also came from the workers themselves, whose livelihoods were highly dependent on the coal economy, especially in Shanxi province, where coal fields were located in remote regions without alternative sources of employment (Wright 2012).

The reform did not really achieve the reduction of illegal mines but it nevertheless contributed to improving safety measures. At the same time, SOEs experienced a new round of extensive reforms under the principle of 'keeping the large, releasing the small' (抓大放小), which put much pressure on these companies to downsize, privatise, or even close (Rui 2005, 77). This led to a substantial number of workers being laid-off—with some estimating a 25 percent decrease in the number of workers employed in coal SOEs between 1996 and 2001 (Wright 2012, 146)—while others faced substantial cuts to their benefits. In my interviews, coal miners in Datong remember

this ‘difficult’ (困难) period as part of the inevitable fluctuations of the coal industry. They added that soon after this period the coal industry was recovering and that the coal demand boomed from 2001, entering the ‘golden decade’ (黄金十年) of coal production.

The ‘Golden Decade’ (2003–12)

As key agents in the political economy of the coal industry, coal bosses (煤老板) appeared as the primary winners in the early 2000s, in the context of a marketisation of all coal production units. Growing from small-scale capitalism in the rural private and collective coal mining sector, they were highly controversial figures; the high profits that the sector appeared to offer attracted much investment, especially from the Wenzhou region (Wright 2012, 98–102). In Shanxi, during the mining boom the sector lacked a framework for safety protocols and other standards in environmental protection. Coal bosses could take advantage of the many loopholes and pay local cadres to get authorisations to open coal mines and to ensure their silence and complicity, while, on the other hand, the miners worked and lived in extremely poor conditions, risking—and losing—their lives to earn a living (Bollendorff and Ségrétin 2008; China Labour Bulletin 2008). Even state-owned mines, with their lower accident rates, did not have clear governance protocols, especially regarding the control of negative externalities—for instance in terms of pollution, living standards, etc. (Cao 2009). As a consequence of the ‘crisis of governance’, whether they were working in the public or in the private sector, the families of miners had low living standards in dangerous and polluted environments (Zhang 2013).

In the mid-2000s, safety issues in the workplace played an important part in the evolution of coal production. The politics of work safety and the scandal of mining accidents in China in those years factored

in the decision of the Chinese authorities to eventually limit private and collective mines and to impose stricter controls on mining activity (Wright 2004 and 2007). In 2005, the central authorities issued new policies in favour of the development of large, publicly-owned coal bases such as Tongmei (see State Council 2005; National Development and Reform Commission 2007). The coal industry undertook a process of ‘rationalisation’ and was even able to survive the 2008 global financial crisis, due to a cold winter and to the Olympic Games that year (Thomann 2018). The next year, the coal sector was booming in the context of large investments in infrastructure (Wright 2012, 82). In addition, in 2008 and 2009 the provincial government of Shanxi implemented a small-scale mine closure policy. Large-scale public coal groups like Tongmei grew even bigger by bringing smaller mines under their umbrella, and ended up managing more mines and supplying most of the national production in a context of rising coal demand.

In the same period, living conditions became a field of social intervention by state-owned coal-mining enterprises. In 2005, the Datong city government, Tongmei, and the provincial government of Shanxi began to address the long-lasting ‘social disaster’ of mining-induced land-subsidence by implementing massive displacement and relocation measures (Zhang 2013). Despite issues in terms of compensation policy and other implementation problems, the move from mining ‘slums’ to apartment buildings and rising safety standards reinforced the loyalty of the workers towards the SOE (Yang, Zhao, and Ho 2017; Audin 2018). According to my interviews with Tongmei coal miners, the ‘golden years’ were beneficial to them, with monthly salaries going up to 10,000 yuan along with the provision of a more comfortable living environment (modern housing, public services, local amenities). According to my interviews, coal miners found opportunities to raise their families, make a livelihood, and access a form of stability as state-owned mine workers.



(Up) Datong 'new' ancient city. Datong, June 2019.
(Below) Demolition in Datong city centre. Datong,
June 2019. PC: Judith Audin.

Downsizing the Coal Industry

In 2013 the price of coal fell, beginning a difficult period. In parallel, the central authorities announced new policy orientations for the energy sector, coupled with a proactive anti-corruption campaign targeting Shanxi province. New guidelines to promote more ‘sustainable’ (可持续) pathways of development were introduced, targeting the ‘resource-based cities’ mentioned at the beginning of this essay (State Council 2013). According to this document, cities that were too dependent on resource extraction and oversupply needed to diversify their economy and reduce their negative impact on the environment (see also the photo essay by Li 2018). In Datong, the development of the coal industry was based on systematic investments (and debt) in the coal sector, with coal enterprises actively moving towards specialisation and automation; the coal excess capacity benefitted the city government as a source of local GDP growth and tax revenue. Datong urban development itself was characterised by a high level of public debt.

In 2016 the Chinese government implemented strict de-capacity policies in order to increase the productivity of the coal industry and search for new pathways for development, including pollution reduction (State Council 2016). More precisely, in February 2016, the central government announced 1.8 million layoffs, 1.3 million of which were in the coal sector. These measures were announced along with the institution of a 100-billion-yuan fund by the central government aimed at facilitating the transition, but no clear agenda was published in terms of employment policy.

The implementation of this new policy is complex, with many unintended consequences due to the heterogeneous political status of coal mines. Only SOEs receive financial subsidies from the central government, and SOE mine cadres tend to comply with the policy, as they know that this will benefit their careers. In contrast, locally-owned private mines do not

have the same incentives to comply (Shi, Rioux, and Galkin 2018). Moreover, as former policy reform programmes have shown in the past, policymakers at the provincial and local levels have different interest, which often create a mismatch in the implementation of such reform policies. The provincial authorities of Shanxi province were active in following the guidelines set by the central authorities in the Thirteenth Five-year Plan (2016–20) for the coal industry. The de-capacity measures targeted the mines with an output below 600,000 tons of coal per year. For instance, the provincial government announced the closure of 88 coal mines and a reduction of 69.2 million tons of production for the 2016–18 period. In 2019, it further announced another cut of 18.95 million tons of coal over-capacity and the closure of 18 more coal mines (Xinhua 2019). In 2016, according to a newspaper article, the Shanxi provincial government stated that out of 31,662 workers targeted as being cut off due to coal over-capacity, 31,586 had already been reassigned (Xinhua 2017). Tongmei Group chairman Zhang Youxi stated in October 2016 that ‘there would be no laid-off worker’ under the current de-capacity measures (CPPCC Daily 2017). But, from the coal miners’ perspectives, such restructuring does produce immediate difficulties and future uncertainties.

The ways local communities cope with the coal transition are specific to each local context. For instance, in Heilongjiang, the coal miners of Shuangyashan mine, owned by Longmei—a state-owned group—went on strike to protest for their unpaid wages after the governor of the province, Lu Hao, publicly stated that miners had been paid on time despite the de-capacity measures (Wong, Chen, and Stanway 2016; Li 2016). The miners claimed they had not been paid for several months. As a result, Lu Hao apologised and promised to allocate more subsidies (Buckley 2016). Indeed, during my fieldwork in 2015–16, many miners from Tongmei confirmed they had late salaries and decreasing incomes. Yet in Datong, I did not witness any public protest, which does not mean that there was no tension

on the de-capacity issue. Following the coal reform, Shanxi province—and Datong more precisely—are expected to remain one of the main hubs of coal production. Therefore, large entities like Tongmei are reinforced as major coal centres, concentrating production in their modern, productive, innovative model mines. At the same time, Tongmei Group still owns historical, old-style coal mines. The closure of small-scale coal mines and the restructuring of the industry did bring up serious challenges for Tongmei and the local workforce. With a labour force of approximately 200,000 employees, the sphere of responsibility of the enterprise includes a total of 800,000 people, including workers and their family members, not to mention the retired workforce. For example, the closure in 2016 of Tongjialiang (同家梁), one of Tongmei's historical coal mines represented an important symbolic event. According to regular field visits between 2016 and 2019, even if the workers were reassigned to work in other mines owned by Tongmei, they were very worried about the future. Moreover, the remaining residents of the closed mine area—farmers and retired miners—were deeply concerned about being left behind in a place of decay. But, overall, there was a strong sense of loyalty and relative confidence in Tongmei as a source of employment and livelihood. Even during difficult conjunctures, the miners thought it was ‘too big to fail’.

New Priorities

Following the new policy of moving away from ‘coal as the one and only source of power’ (一煤独大), the city of Datong announced new green priorities, including a commitment to improve air quality under the slogan ‘Datong blue’ (大同蓝). The efforts to reduce air pollution produced some real outcomes, as the city ranked first for air quality out of 11 cities in Shanxi province in 2015. To boost economic growth, the city turned to new engines of

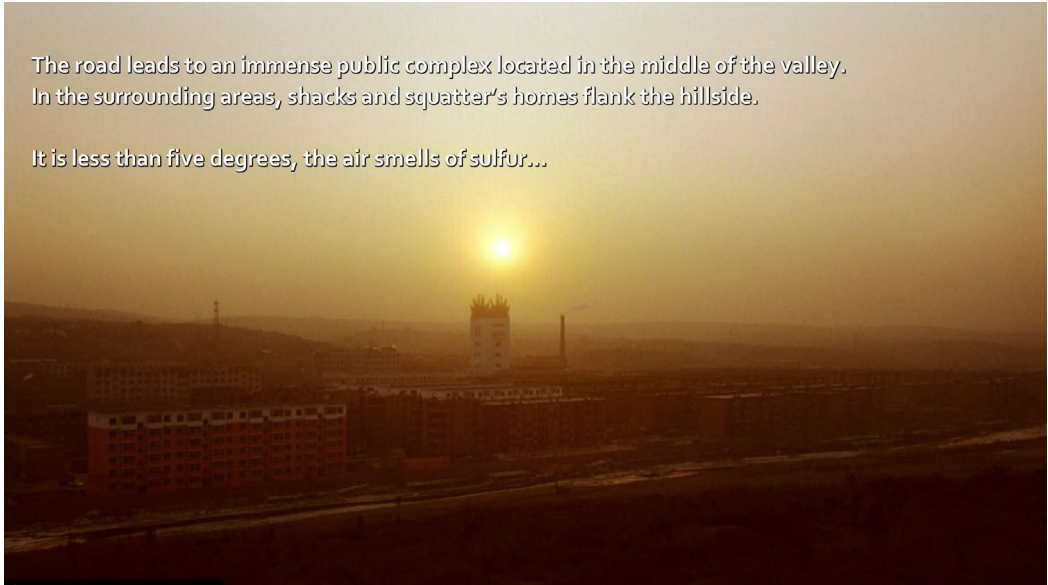
development, especially tourism. In the mining district, there is strong emphasis on new power sources such as wind and solar energy. However, although Datong residents, including miners, appreciate the cleaner air and decongested road traffic in the city, these new sectors still rely heavily on public subsidies and employ fewer workers than coal production.

This rapid transition involved violent transformations and disparities in the city, especially in terms of social issues (Li 2018; Audin 2018). From 2008 to 2012, former Datong mayor Geng Yanbo launched the fast demolition/reconstruction of the city centre in order to build a new ‘historical and cultural ancient city’ (历史文化古城), a process documented in the 2015 film *The Chinese Mayor* by Zhou Hao (Kinkel 2017).

However, during the coal crisis, according to my observations, the project had slowed down. When coal prices took off again in 2017, urban planning projects followed, but at a slow pace (Audin 2018). During my latest field trip in June 2019, I noticed more active construction. The mayor's project was almost completed. Among other aspects, it was striking that most of the population had been evicted and relocated outside of the city centre. Inside the new ‘ancient’ city walls, the area is now fully dedicated to tourism. Tongmei also prepared for the coal restructuring mandated by China's energy policy by taking steps towards the ‘heritagisation’ of the mining land. In 2012, a coal mine museum officially opened to the public in one of Tongmei's historical mines, Jinhuaogong (晋华宫), just across the river from the world-famous Yungang Grottoes. As late as 2008, Jinhuaogong used to be a heavily polluted mining complex. The park was built on a 463-million-yuan investment: efforts at landscaping in the alleys of the mine park and the blue sky produce a contrasting, clean image. The originality of the place is that it is an active mine, where teams of workers come and go by the same entrance as the visitors, marked by a symbolic ‘Long Live the Miners’ slogan.

The road leads to an immense public complex located in the middle of the valley.
In the surrounding areas, shacks and squatter's homes flank the hillside.

It is less than five degrees, the air smells of sulfur...



(Up) Screenshot of Jinhuagong mine in 2008, taken from the web-documentary film *Journey to the End of Coal* (Bollendorf and Ségrétin 2008).
(Below) Jinhuagong coal mine museum park. Datong, May 2017. PC: Judith Audin.



'Long Live the Miners' monument, Jinhuaogong coal mine park, Datong, February 2016. PC: Judith Audin.

Despite these efforts, according to interviews with the staff that I conducted in 2016 and 2017, the park receives a low number of tourists apart from the relatives of coal miners in town for a visit. More generally, the issue of the reduction and reassignment of the mining labour force continues to cause concern among Tongmei workers, as neither the new renewable energy sector nor tourism seem to represent potential alternatives for such a massive population of workers. Moreover, reemployment issues are complex and involve the younger generations as well.

In conclusion, the political economy of coal mining in contemporary China shifted during the reform era towards the domination of 'giant' SOEs. During the 'golden decade', large state-owned mines took control of the coal industry in Shanxi and provided relative stability to the local coal community. This system was disrupted in 2013 during the coal crisis. Since 2016, in the context of the profound restructuring of the industry, de-

capacity measures were developed under a complex nexus of power interactions at the global, national, and local scales. These interactions are having multifaceted impacts on the livelihoods of diverse groups of coal miners, which calls for more ethnographic research on the different coal communities in China. ■

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FANUC R-2000iB series robot. PC: Wikimedia Commons.

The End of Sweatshops?

Robotisation and the Making of New Skilled Workers in China

Hui XU

In the past few years, the Chinese labour market has experienced a transition from surplus to shortage of labour, which has led to increased wages for ordinary workers. In such a context, since 2015 the Chinese authorities have pursued a policy of industrial upgrading based on the robotisation of the manufacturing sector. This essay explores the impact of such rapid-employ, large-scale robotisation on labour relations in Chinese factories.

Over the past four decades China has undergone a process of massive industrialisation that has allowed the country to achieve remarkable economic growth. Because of its large manufacturing capacity based on a seemingly unlimited supply of cheap migrant labour in light industries, China has come to be known as the ‘workshop of the world’. However, since the early 2000s the country’s labour market has experienced a remarkable transition from labour surplus to a

shortage of labour, which has led to sustained increases in the wages of ordinary workers. In such a context, since 2015 robotisation has become a driving policy for industrial upgrading for manufacturing in China, with the slogan ‘replacing human workers with industrial robots’ (机器换人) frequently appearing in media reports and official policy documents.

This essay seeks to elucidate the impact of large-scale robotisation on labour relations in Chinese factories. The main argument is that accompanying the application of new production technologies, emerges a new group of skilled workers who possess specific skills related to the operation of industrial robots. Benefitting from the current scarcity of such skills, these workers attain a certain degree of structural power in both the labour market and workplace, which results in wage hikes. The article concludes that, given that industrial upgrading is mainly driven by the Chinese state, the making and developing of new skilled workers is aimed at reorganising labour relations in the largely-robotised manufacturing workshops.

This essay is based on fieldwork conducted by the author between 2011 and 2019 at Foxconn and other factories that are being upgraded in the Pearl River Delta. Group meetings and in-depth interviews with people from vocational schools as well as skills training institutes have provided additional material. More specifically, I also spent ten weeks in a commercial robotic skills training institute learning how to install, programme, debug, and maintain industrial robots.

The Macro Dimension of Robotisation

As the biggest contract electronics manufacturer in the world, Foxconn was notorious for its gruelling production regime that in 2010 resulted in dozens of workers committing suicides. In order to address the

instability deriving from workers’ grievances, in 2011 Foxconn announced a plan to replace workers with one million robots within three years. In many ways, this ambitious scheme epitomises the tendency of industrial upgrading in Chinese manufacturing industries in recent years, as the current model of economic growth, which relies on labour exploitation, shows its limitations.

Apart from the increasingly vigorous labour activism, structural imbalances in the Chinese economy were a major factor behind such a change of direction, with the Chinese authorities admitting in 2014 that the country was entering a ‘new normal’ (新常态) era in which economic growth would be more moderate than in previous decades. In contrast with meteoric growth before, since 2014 the Chinese economy has been under pressure due to the progressive disappearance of the labour dividend. The continuous and rapid growth in the wages of ordinary migrant workers ended up undermining China’s comparative advantage, making it difficult for manufacturing enterprises to recruit cheaply-paid workers. Additionally, official figures suggest that manufacturing orders, as well as export volume, are now all declining because of the weakness of European and American markets since the financial crisis in 2008, not to mention the fact that rising labour costs has led to a new round of industrial relocation to cheaper countries in South and Southeast Asia (Chen 2009; Ministry of Commerce 2016). Under such circumstances, the past growth model driven by factor investment is now unsustainable, and Chinese manufacturing industries are forced to upgrade by relying on technological progress and high-quality labour.

Nowadays, the world is witnessing a fourth industrial revolution based on maturing technologies in the fields of artificial intelligence, digital manufacturing, and industrial robots. The decreasing cost and large-scale application of these new technologies is making the restructuring of the system of production possible. For instance, employing industrial robots can not only fill in the gap of

labour scarcity but also improve the functions and quality of products. Unsurprisingly, in this new industrial context, China is confronting fierce international competition from developed countries, including Germany with its Industry 4.0 initiative (Schroeder 2016). Against this background, in 2015 the Chinese authorities released the Made in China 2025 (MiC 2025) plan, which projects a three-step strategy aimed at moving up the value chain by 2025, and, making China a leading manufacturing power by 2035 (China State Council 2015). Paralleling the German Industry 4.0 initiative, MiC 2025 prioritises innovation in manufacturing, as well as integration between information technology and industries in a top-down fashion.

Guangdong province—one of the most critical manufacturing bases in China, where labour shortages have been quite severe in recent years—plays a central role in this strategy. Local governments in the area have issued multiple policies aimed at promoting industrial upgrade. At the provincial level, in July 2015 the Guangdong government released the Guangdong Province Intelligent Manufacturing Development Plan (2015–25) (广东省智能制造发展规划2015–25). At the city level, the municipal government of Dongguan has recently released three official documents, namely the Practical Opinion on Accelerating the Development of Industrial Robot and Intelligent Industrial Equipment (加快推动工业机器人智能装备产业发展的实施意见), the Action Plan for Promoting the Replacement of Human Workers with Industrial Robots in Dongguan (2014–16) (推进企业‘机器换人’行动计划), and the Funding Management Rules for Replacing Human Workers with Industrial Robots (‘机器换人’专项资金管理办法). Similarly, in May 2015 the municipal government of Foshan released the Foshan City Scheme for Supporting Enterprises to Adopt Industrial Robots and Intelligent Equipment (2015–17) (佛山市扶持企业推进机器人及智能装备应用实施方案2015–17).

As a result of these policies, the number of robotic manufacturers and their output in Guangdong province has grown significantly. In 2017, 156 enterprises were producing robots, and the total number of installed industrial robots reached approximately 80,000 units (Guangdong Provincial Government 2018). In Dongguan from September 2014 to January 2017, the municipal government invested 38.6 billion yuan on 2,698 robotic projects (Yu 2017). At the same time, in Foshan city the municipal Finance Bureau set aside 160 million yuan to subsidise 368 robotic projects that deployed more than 7,000 industrial robots in enterprises (Foshan News 2018).

Robotisation on the Shopfloor

But what kind of jobs can be replaced by industrial robots? How does the production process work in factories that mainly use industrial robots? To respond to these questions, it is important to look at the dynamics at the shopfloor level.

In spite of all the media emphasis, Foxconn did not achieve the goal of the One Million Robots plan that it had unveiled in 2011. In 2015, however, the company announced again that it would reach 30 percent automation by 2020 (He 2015). According to media reports, the robotic R&D and production bases of Foxconn are located in Shenzhen and Jincheng, where Foxconn can produce 10,000 industrial robots per year (He 2015). By 2018 the company was deploying more than 80,000 units of industrial robots in its factories across the country (Foxconn Industrial Internet 2019). Foxconn revealed that through automation and upgrading in one of its workshops in Shenzhen the number of assemblers had declined from 318 to 38, while the production efficiency had increased by 30 percent with the inventory cycle time contracting by 15 percent (Foxconn Industrial Internet 2019). According to company data, in all Foxconn automated

factories in 2018 productivity had risen by 18 percent, labour cost had shrunk by 84 percent, and management expenses were 8 percent lower.

Mr Day Chia-Peng, the general manager of the Automation Robotics Division at Foxconn, divides automation in production in three stages: the first stage consists of workstation automation by using industrial robots to do the dirty, dangerous, and dull work which workers are not willing to do or which will jeopardise workers physical and mental health; the second stage is the automation of the assembly line by employing not only industrial robots but also other non-standardised automated equipment; the third stage is the automation of an entire workshop, achieving flexible production in assembling, logistics, testing, and packaging (Zhang 2015).

In general, automation upgrading in workshops is a gradual process. Currently, most enterprises are still in the first stage of workstation automation. Nowadays, in Dongguan, if firms can recoup the costs in one and a half years, they would like to use industrial robots to replace human workers (Sun 2017). However, there is rarely an entire assembly line robotised. Only a small number of firms with substantial capital and technical capability can achieve some of the assembly line automatisations and move toward the automation of the whole workshop. The current situation is that leading enterprises can continuously promote automation of whole workshops, while medium and small-sized firms prefer to gradually introduce industrial robots for assembly lines and workstations.

Replacing human workers with industrial robots means that much of the dirty, dangerous, and dull work will be done robotically. Compared to the Taylorist assembly lines, this is a significant improvement of the labour process, as the daily work in workshops is transformed into robotic programming and communication between automated equipment, installing, debugging, and maintaining industrial robots. As I will show in the next section, this also has an impact on labour relations in China.

Strengthening Workers' Structural and Institutional Power

Industrial automation has gradually changed the composition of the labour force in workshops, with a dramatic decrease of ordinary assemblers as well as a desperate need for skilled workers, including electrical engineers, mechanical engineers, programming engineers, and debugging engineers. According to estimates by China's Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, by 2020 the Chinese labour market will need approximately 200,000 skilled workers in the field of robotic operation and maintenance, system installing and debugging, and system integration and application (Zhai 2017).

Facing this massive demand, the current supply of skilled workers does not suffice. In 2015, about 260,000 industrial robots had been installed in workshops in China, but the whole country had only 165 graduates studying industrial robot technology in higher vocational schools (China Education Daily 2017). This imbalance was due to two reasons. On the one hand, the low-end industrial structure plus the de-skilling production technologies result in lack of investment in migrant workers' skills. On the other hand, the vocational training system in China is still weak and cannot match market demand. As a result, the quality of education and training is usually low.

In the context of such a structural shortage of skilled workers, in theory mastering core technical skills should strengthen the bargaining power of skilled workers in the labour market. Indeed, this is consistent with what I found through my fieldwork. According to my findings, in the Pearl River Delta a student intern who studies industrial robot technology can expect to be paid an average monthly wage of 3,000–3,500 yuan, and even as high as 5,000 yuan, for their apprenticeship. For those who have finished robotic skills training programmes, the average starting

salary is 6,648 yuan, a relatively-high level compared to the wages of low-skilled ordinary workers. Some experienced workers skilled in installing and debugging industrial robots can even get paid 1,500–2,000 yuan a day. This kind of wage level alone hints at these workers' rising bargaining power on the labour market.

According to my field observations, robotised workshops are also experiencing a reorientation from the previous hierarchical and disciplinary regime of the assembly line to a more dispersive and cooperative management model. Leading firms like Foxconn usually operate on a large scale and can invest massive resources in automation and informatisation upgrading. Moreover, they have the capacity to set up technical departments to recruit and train skilled workers directly. In contrast, in medium- and small-sized manufacturing factories, robotic system integrators are in charge of building automated assembly lines and are responsible for training skilled workers during the project period, so that when they complete the project and withdraw from the manufacturing enterprises, these trained skilled workers can take over the daily operation and maintenance work. Nevertheless, the workers they train only master basic robotic skills and cannot disentangle complex problems. Once a severe fault occurs, if under warranty, integrator companies will dispatch technical engineers to tackle it, but if the warranty has already expired, the manufacturing companies prefer to buy technical services from a third-party company. Sometimes, in order to reduce costs, small-sized workshops outsource the work to the self-employed skilled workers.

My preliminary findings suggest that leading firms differ from medium and small-sized factories in terms of forms of employment, wages, and management style. More specifically, engineers in leading firms are usually treated as managerial personnel in that they enjoy higher wages, more training opportunities, and better job security. In medium and small-sized manufacturing factories where skilled workers are responsible for daily operation and maintenance work, their wages are slightly

higher than those of ordinary workers, but they rarely have a chance to learn new skills and climb the corporate ladder, so their turnover rate is relatively high. On the other hand, skilled workers from third-party technical service companies and self-employed experienced engineers have no direct employment relations with these manufacturing enterprises, so they enjoy more control over the work process.

Supply-side Reforms

In order to increase the supply of skilled workers, not only market mechanisms but also governmental intervention is needed. In January 2019, the Chinese authorities issued the National Vocational Education Reform Implementation Plan (国家职业教育改革实施方案), which aims at improving the quality of vocational education and cultivating high-quality labourers and skilled workers. In addition, in March 2019 Prime Minister Li Keqiang declared in his annual government work report (China State Council 2019), that the central government would invest 100 billion yuan in training more than 15 million workers, and that migrant workers would be eligible for the first time to enrol in higher vocational schools. The following Vocational Skills Improvement Action Plan (2019–21) (职业技能提升行动方案2019–21), published by the State Council in May 2019, further details the goal of subsidising skills training for more than 50 million workers, with the aim of having skilled workers accounting for 25 percent of the entire employed workforce by 2021. Meanwhile, a system that connects skills training with a professional qualification certificate scheme is also under construction as a basis for professional admittance, assessment, and promotion.

The reform of the skills formation system aims at improving the quality of the available training, but the question of how to encourage workers to learn skills is a completely different matter. Generally speaking, skilled workers are

concerned with wages and urban citizenship. In this regard, in March 2018 the State Council published the Opinions on Improving the Treatment of Skilled Workers (提高技术工人待遇的意见) to put in place mechanisms for the distribution and growth of wages and other long-term incentives. More importantly, more and more local governments—including Foshan—have begun to grant skilled workers with urban citizenship, allowing them to enjoy equal access to public services.

In sum, robotisation upgrading in manufacturing is strengthening the marketplace and workplace bargaining power of skilled workers. At the workplace level, skilled workers can now demand higher wages, get more training opportunities, enjoy better job security, and establish more cooperative relations with the management; at the marketplace level, the Chinese government is offering skilled workers urban citizenship in order to boost their ranks. Migrant workers also benefit from these changing dynamics, as they are offered substantial training subsidies to improve their skills.

workers on assembly lines are not suitable for these newly-empowered skilled workers. According to the findings that I presented in this essay, the relations between skilled workers and management in robotised manufacturing enterprises are more cooperative, especially when these skilled workers come from robotic body-maker or system integration companies. In general, it is plausible to suppose that, with the reform of the vocational education system as the Chinese authorities invest more resources in cultivating skilled workers, new skilled workers will play a decisive role in the dynamics of industrial relations in China in the coming years. ■

A Solution for the Sweatshop Problem?

This essay has offered an outline of the current situation of robotisation in manufacturing in China. In phasing out jobs that are usually repetitive, dirty, dangerous, and monotonous, robotisation has the potential to increase productivity, improve the quality of products, and protect migrant workers' health. In this sense, it offers a solution to ease the problems of the sweatshop.

The upgrading of manufacturing technologies also has implications for labour relations on the shopfloor. In a labour market where skilled labour is scarce, skilled workers have strengthened their structural power, obtaining higher wages and more training opportunities. At the same time, disciplinary managerial tactics that are used to control



Is the Sky Falling in on Women in China?

Standing Committee of the
Central Political Bureau of
the Communist Party of
China, 2017. PC: Sohu.com.

Robert WALKER
Jane MILLAR

China has fallen to 106th place in World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index for 2020. Drawing on recently-published research by Chinese scholars, this article explores whether this accurately reflects the status of women in contemporary China, concluding that China's progress towards gender equality has stalled in the face of the powerful combination of marketisation and patriarchy.

If women in China once held up half the sky, they no longer do. China has slipped again this year to 106th place in the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index (GGI), behind Brazil and Russia and just six places ahead of India. In 2006, China was placed 63rd, albeit out 112 rather than 153 countries (WEF 2006, 2020). It is clearly important to understand the reasons behind this downward spiral.

Progress with the People's Republic of China

Mao Zedong's aphorism about women holding up half the sky may have been aspirational, and was certainly full of political

intent, but the first 35 years of the People's Republic of China (PRC) brought great improvements for the status of women. Article 6 of China's Constitution prescribes that 'Women should enjoy equal rights with men in political, economic, cultural, educational and social life' and, nominally ending customary arranged marriages, that 'freedom of marriage for men and women shall be put into effect'. State-owned enterprises and, to a lesser extent, collective farms supported women's ability to work through the provision of childcare such that female labour participation rose rapidly and remained at 'saturation levels' for much of the period between 1958 and 1978. Moreover, although women have never achieved the pay parity promised by the first National People's Congress in 1954, women's incomes rose significantly relative to men's, reaching a high point of 84 percent in 1988 (Yang 2020).

However, it is important not to overstate the achievements of the early years of the PRC. China's official news agency, Xinhua, noted in 2009 that when Mao spoke his much-quoted words in 1968, the All-China Women's Federation had ceased to function because gender sameness was the goal, not gender equality: women were 'to be battle-dressed, and not rosy-gowned' (People's Daily 2009). But, even before the Cultural Revolution, there is evidence that, as Judith Stacey observed, 'the socialist revolution in China was patriarchal' replacing Confucian patriarchy 'first by new democratic patriarchy, and then by patriarchal socialism' (Stacey 1983, 253). The land reform movement reallocated land to men not to women, while Liu (2007) argues that the work unit (*danwei* 单位), the workplace and source of wrap-around occupational welfare, created a Confucian-like family with the leadership as patriarchs. Women were multiply disadvantaged: less likely to be soldiers or graduates they had little chance of being promoted from worker (工人) to cadre (干部), and therefore they were weakly placed when it came to matchmaking, housing allocation, surveillance of family life, and family planning,

all of which were responsibilities of the *danwei* leadership. It is against this backdrop that we need to assess claims that, while women's status advanced during the first 35 years of the PRC, it has stalled and may, in some respects, have regressed since the onset of the reforms.

Casualties of Economic Reform

Evidence that women's progress, both absolute and relative, has indeed stalled since the reform and opening up of the economy initiated by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s is provided in 12 articles by 20 Chinese scholars published in the latest issue of the academic journal *Social Inclusion*. China's falling place in the GGI provides a starting point, but there are good reasons why the GGI might not flatter China. The sex ratio at birth, for example, is effectively counted twice and China's imbalanced sex ratio is the worst in the world with 115 boys being born for every 100 girls. Nevertheless, Chen Binli and He Hailan (2020) reveal that the fall in China's position in the world league table cannot simply be explained by this or by the addition of new countries. Whereas countries overall have improved significantly with respect to three of the four indicators included in the GGI—economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, and political empowerment—China's progress has not kept pace.

It is important not to overlook the fact that, since the GGI was introduced in 2006, China's per capita gross domestic product has increased by over 465 percent and poverty measured at 1.90 USD/day has fallen from about 18 percent to much less than 1 percent. Nevertheless, men seem to have benefitted more than women from China's economic miracle as the logic of the marketplace has placed women at a growing disadvantage. For instance, Yang Juhua (2020) shows that over this period women's wages fell from 79 percent to just 65 percent as a



Women's work in the home, village, and city, Guizhou province. PC: Robert Walker.

proportion of men's at a time when women's level of educational attainment was growing much faster than men's.

Processes increasing gender inequality began in the early 1980s with the 'return home' (回家) movement designed to create employment opportunities for young people returning from the countryside, where they had been sent during the Cultural Revolution. There then followed the closure of many *danwei* in the 1990s which employed disproportionate numbers of women who, evidence suggests, lost their jobs first because of their low status, lack of connections, and willingness not to create 'trouble', or, perhaps, their inability to do so given their weak position (Wang 2003). More recently, the emphasis on profit maximisation, which fails to value non-marketable care and children, is deterring employers from hiring and promoting women, a trend ironically

exacerbated by improved maternity benefits designed to encourage women into work (Xi 2019). The current female labour force participation rate, 61 percent in 2019, is only two-thirds of what it was in the 1960s (Bauer et al. 1992).

The Power of Patriarchy

However, to focus exclusively on the economy is to neglect the persistent power of patriarchy. China's economic growth since opening up has been fuelled by the largest rural-urban migration in history. In accordance with the traditional maxim that 'the man dominates outside, and the woman dominates inside' (男主外, 女主内), the first wave of migration in the 1980s saw men leaving women behind to care



Qing Chun, Pursuing Dreams, Beijing's National Museum of Art, 2018.
PC: Robert Walker.

for farms and children. A decade or so later the second wave comprised younger unmarried men and women, and therefore appeared to have the potential to break the shackles of patriarchy, family, and place. Ethnographies in the *Social Inclusion* special issue show that this was not to be.

Young women initially enjoyed the freedom engendered by higher urban wages together with the possibility of meeting and marrying someone of their choice. Moreover, with the younger generation earning urban wages and thereby contributing the larger share of income to the extended family, this frequently meant a shift in influence away from the parental generation (Yang and Ren 2020). However, limited qualifications trapped most young women migrants in informal or routine factory work that offered few prospects and incomes that merely replaced absolute poverty with

relative poverty (Zhang 2020). For a small minority, prostitution, the life of a *xiaojie* (小姐), appeared preferable to the exploitation of factory work, enabling them to identify with a portfolio of roles—singer, dancer, confidant, networker, and businesswoman—that seemed modern and to speak of agency and independence (Ding 2020). But all women migrants risked innuendo as to their motives as unmarried young women living away from home, and sexual harassment and worse from employers and other men at work. Vietnamese migrants arriving in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands defined by the Nanning–the Friendship Port–Hanoi economic corridor saw marriage to a Chinese man as protection against such abuse, as freedom from the restrictions of the village, and as a route to relative prosperity (Huang 2020).

However, for most Chinese migrants a permanent life in the city is impossible without a graduate education. Attachment to the village is enforced by the household registration system (*hukou* 户口), which denies migrants permanent residence in the city and limits their ability to access welfare services to the place of their birth. On marriage, men's jobs are prioritised, not always for economic reasons since female migrants can often earn more working on assembly lines than men can earn through manual labour. That said, the continued preference for sons over daughters, attested to by the heavily skewed sex ratio at birth, means that it is not uncommon for women to have forsaken education to support the progress of their brothers, thereby weakening their position in the labour market and in marriage (Fan and Chen 2020). Lone daughters, in contrast, may be treated like sons, pushed to succeed educationally only then to be expected to make a suitable match and behave as the dutiful wife. Moreover, while such traditional patriarchal values may be more prevalent in rural areas and among working class and rural migrants, they are also evident among China's elite. Tu Mengwei and Xie Kailing (2020) interviewed 'privileged daughters' living abroad in the United Kingdom and found that their parents assessed success in terms of their daughters achieving a good marriage, and were fearful that academic prowess and financial independence would prevent this since the conventional pattern is for Chinese males to marry their social inferiors. Marriage, too, is a powerful predictor of when women withdraw from the labour market, women care for the home while men work outside (Xi 2019).

Women Lacking Power

To turn again to rural-urban migrants, women are likely to return to the village with the arrival of children, more typically on the birth of a second child since grandparents are generally thought able to look after one child

left behind in the village. However, for most women this is not a return to their own village. Because of the principle of patrilocality, living with or close to the husband's family generally still prevails. As outsiders in their husbands' village and without the protection of a local *hukou*, migrant wives are vulnerable to exploitation and often carry heavy burdens: working the land, caring for children, picking up casual employment, and frequently providing domestic services and personal care at the beck and call of their in-laws. Zhang Guanli (2020) finds, moreover, that they never manage to cast off the stigma of being an outsider or that of the poverty that caused them to migrate to a more prosperous province. Yang Lichao and Ren Xiaodong (2020) confirm this, but further find that even women migrants who return to their own village in Shanxi province, either still single or having married locally, find little recognition of the skills or experience that they have acquired as migrants. As many as 40 percent of returnees said that they would like to be involved in village governance but the response of one village head was typical:

Young women are more capable than the older generations. But it is a rule for women to stay inside to look after the family and men work outside to deal with big issues. It also works in village governance (Cited in Yang and Ren 2020).

Such views may help to explain why just 6 percent of village heads are women and, in microcosm, hint at why only 8 percent of the membership of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, the most powerful political body, are female. There is public recognition of this deficiency, with both the China Women's Development Outline (2011–20) and the National Human Rights Action Plan (2016–20) calling for increased representation of women, an aspiration enshrined in election law. However, there appears to be much tokenism—with women on the leadership teams of 90 percent of the provinces and municipalities and 88 percent of the counties

but not in large numbers—and little consistent improvement, certainly relative to other countries. In 2020, China ranked 95th on the political empowerment component of the GGI compared to 52nd in 2006.

A Corrupted Ideal

Overall, the evidence assembled by the scholars writing in *Social Inclusion* suggests that the distinguishing feature of China's market socialism is perhaps its fusion with patriarchal socialism—the government continues to know what is best. By focussing on economic growth and the maximisation of marketable wealth, and with women effectively excluded from political decisions that matter, the PRC's founding ideological commitment to gender equality has become corrupted and, as Yang Juhua (2020) concludes, 'conditional on the premise of not harming the interests of men'. For women to hold up half the sky, they need an equal share of power. But in China, that seems still to be a very long way off. ■



PC: Peiyu Liu, Flickr.com.

Garbage as Value and Sorting as Labour in China's New Waste Policy

Adam LIEBMAN
Goeun LEE

In 2019, China began implementing a controversial new garbage sorting system in Shanghai. By considering often-unrecognised forms of labour and the interstices of value that many waste objects occupy, this essay examines how waste work has become a site of heightened contestation with multiple types of value in play.

On 1 July 2019, new rules went into effect forcing Shanghai residents and businesses to sort their garbage into four categories (wet, dry, hazardous, and recyclable) under the threat of fines and social credit penalties. An explosion of social media commentary ensued, some supportive but most cynical. The question ‘what kind of garbage are you?’ (你是什么垃圾?)—a shortened version of the question asked by sanitation staff when items are being dropped off at garbage stations—came to signify the inconvenience and confusion felt by many urban residents. The remark, which also implies that *you are garbage*, goes further to capture feelings of

indictment of those who are used to paying little attention to garbage as they let waste workers deal with it. The controversy over the new rules is therefore not only about the state's gaze extending into a new frontier of people's private lives through an emergent 'eco-dictatorship', a term with Cold-War resonances emphasised in a recent analysis in *The Guardian* (Kuo 2019). Going beyond this narrow interpretation, we suggest that the controversy is also related to the redistribution of labour (Zhang 2019), especially if labour is viewed broadly to include unregulated and domestic forms.



'What kind of garbage are you?' Illustration from a popular WeChat post (WKGY 2019).

Full implementation of the new garbage sorting system, focussed primarily on individual household waste, is set to extend to 46 key cities by the end of 2020 with the help of a state investment of 21.3 billion yuan (3.1 billion USD) (China Daily 2019). How does this attempt to build infrastructure for a government–citizen waste management partnership interact with existing formations of waste labour—comprised of frugal residents, scrap traders, sanitation workers, building cleaners, and more? How is the value imbued in some waste materials redistributed, and whose livelihoods could be negatively impacted? We address these questions by looking at the emergent

garbage-sorting project from a perspective that accounts for often-unrecognised forms of labour and the interstices of value that many waste objects occupy. This intervention draws on Adam's long-term ethnographic work in Kunming city, Yunnan province, which was selected in 2007 as one of 26 pilot cities for testing new policies related to managing waste as a 'renewable resource' (Liebman 2018), as well as Goeun Lee's ongoing study of garbage sorting in Shanghai, the pilot city for the most recent policy push.

Our perspective is built on two key points. First, the promotion of 'garbage sorting' (垃圾分类) is not at all new in China. Important precedents include scrap and kitchen waste collection efforts that were key elements of Mao era political economic planning, promoted for helping the nation develop despite resource shortages. More recently, in response to growing quantities of post-consumer waste (生活垃圾), environmentally-oriented municipal recycling campaigns emerged in China in the early 2000s, although these projects have repeatedly failed (Zhang 2019). Second, the compulsory garbage sorting pilot project in Shanghai should not be understood simply as the Chinese state finally becoming more serious about environmental protection (in a characteristically top-down manner, see for instance Kuo 2019). A complex unfolding of shifts finally set the stage for such strong government action, including but not limited to: falling domestic and global scrap commodity prices in the 2010s (casting more post-consumer waste of marginal value into the category of garbage); municipalities pushing scrap trading industries out of cities while investing in capital-intensive waste incineration plants; and continual increases in the production of disposable products, the mass consumption of those products, and the resulting mass waste. Situating the new waste policy in this broader context suggests that much more is going on than 'a sort of eco-dictatorship'.



Sorting beyond the Four Categories

The push to promote garbage sorting in Shanghai has a complex interaction with existing practices of sorting post-consumer waste and urban governance structures. A few weeks after official enforcement began, Goeun followed social organisation representatives who were educating Shanghai neighbourhood residents and sanitation staff about garbage sorting. The Municipal Administration of Afforestation and City Appearance (市容局) was planning to conduct undercover visits to evaluate how well different neighbourhoods were complying with the policy, although lower-level officials and social organisation staff did not know exactly when the visits would occur. Thus, these groups had an interest in regulating neighbourhood practices and discourses in a comprehensive manner to appear earnest about helping implement the new policy in the eyes of the unknown agents. The spectre of surprise visits and evaluations

A newly-renovated Shanghai neighbourhood garbage structure (垃圾厢房) with a banner reading: 'From 1 July, individuals disposing garbage without sorting may be subject to a fine, maximum 200 yuan [28 USD].' PC: Goeun Lee.

has also created competition among the 220 sub-districts of the Shanghai municipality, which started vying for the city's recognition as a 'model' (示范) area.

Care for Nature (pseudonym) is one of the local environmental social organisations that promotes garbage sorting in Shanghai. Xia (pseudonym), a staff member of the organisation, said it would be embarrassing if her sub-district were ranked low. Such embarrassment might also involve a financial cost, since many social organisations receive government funding. Care for Nature claims to specialise in training neighbourhood residents to become more environmentally aware through garbage sorting. Local bureaucrats call the social organisation a 'third party' (第三方) since it is not officially part of the government apparatus. Despite not being government officials, social organisations like

Care for Nature, in addition to neighbourhood volunteers, often perform affective labour through interpersonal communication with residents about following the new sorting rules.

One morning in a Shanghai neighbourhood, shortly after implementation of the new rules, Xia had a tense conversation with a cleaner. She was quite upset to find an open-top, non-standard container for recyclables at the newly renovated garbage structure, and wanted it gone, because the container not only disrupted the nicely-planned four-category system, but also would definitely damage the neighbourhood's 'green evaluation' if seen by monitoring agents. To Xia, it seemed clear that the neighbourhood cleaner was using the container to separate more valuable recyclables, such as plastic bottles, from less valuable items such as glass bottles. She inspected the non-standard container with glass bottles, which are no longer welcomed by scrap traders due to low prices and difficulties with transportation. The cleaner claimed to know nothing about informal scrap trading, but Xia did not believe it.



The open-top container that the cleaner refused to remove from the neighbourhood garbage structure. PC: Goeun Lee.

In defence of the open-top container with glass bottles inside it, the neighbourhood cleaner elaborated:

When I'm on-site, the residents separate things well. When I'm not, they don't. The cardboard shipping boxes are so numerous and large, people can't fit the recyclables and the boxes in the limited space provided by the official recyclable containers. So I just let the residents throw in whatever recyclables they have into this wide, open-top container. This neighbourhood isn't my only workplace, I have another neighbourhood where I take care of a garbage structure. When I'm back here, I sort things out in accordance with the new rule.

This rationale seemed to doubly disturb Xia. First, this neighbourhood cleaner made it clear that adequate garbage sorting was often made possible by the hidden manual labour of cleaners. Second, the cleaner was effectively hindering this neighbourhood from being better prepared for undercover monitoring of the new rules, because residents would not learn how to properly sort their garbage if they are instead accustomed to relying on the cleaner—which was the status quo prior to July 2019. Xia implied she understood the real reason that the cleaner would keep the open-top container in the garbage structure: 'I know glass bottles are cheap these days.' With a straight face, the cleaner distanced herself from the subtle allegation by claiming she knew nothing about scrap prices. Eventually, Xia raised her voice: 'If you continue *helping* the residents like that, it'll be too much work! You're going to be too tired! I just want you to relax and be happy, okay?' Although her words indicated caring, her stern facial expression and sharp tone of voice revealed that she had different concerns.

This story highlights how the standard four categories through which the new garbage-sorting project is being implemented might not be in line with the markets still relied on

for processing much of these materials. The implementation of new garbage-sorting rules in Shanghai is thus a case where old and new practices of handling waste conflict in many ways: not only in defining what is ‘recyclable’, but also in determining whose practices fit under the umbrella of ‘environmental protection’, whose labour is recognised and socially valued, who has access to the economic values embodied by some waste objects, and who is stuck with the negative associations that can come from working with waste. As Shanghai is serving as a showcase for the Chinese state’s garbage management policy, life there involves negotiation and contestation among people with different interests in defining the value of waste.



The tricycle of an informal scrap trader, parked at the entrance of an apartment complex in Shanghai.
PC: Goeun Lee.

Try Thinking Like a Pig

Shanghai residents have struggled to decipher the four categories of waste on their own. ‘Wet’ garbage is meant to be biodegradable materials destined for compost facilities, while ‘dry’ garbage is meant to be non-hazardous materials that cannot be recycled or composted, destined for incineration plants or landfills. Yet, there also are dry compostables (e.g. peanut shells) and wet garbage sent to landfills

(e.g. pig bones) that make the simplified labels confusing. Social media commentary has offered clever guidelines to try to adapt. One popular post on Weibo suggests thinking from the perspective of a pig—arguably the most important animal from a Chinese culinary perspective, and a creature celebrated during the Mao era as a ‘fertiliser factory’ (化肥厂) and ‘treasure bowl’ (聚宝盆) that could turn food waste into delicious, protein-rich meat while also producing a crucial soil amendment (Schmalzer 2016, 7 and 12). The pig-inspired guidance instructs: ‘If a pig can eat it, it goes into the wet bin. If a pig cannot, it is dry waste. If a pig is likely to die from eating it, the waste is hazardous. If you could sell it and buy a pig with the funds, it is recyclable waste’ (see Kuo 2019).

Although clever and culturally resonant, the pig perspective guidelines remain imperfect at best. The final guideline (if it can be *sold* then it is recyclable) reveals a core contradiction alluded to above. The new regime of four bins is meant to correspond with set material properties and components of waste objects that mark them as wet, dry, hazardous, and recyclable. Yet, whether a post-consumer waste object can be *sold* is not just determined by its material components. It is also determined by market conditions that are constantly shifting. For example, when commodity values of crude oil drop, the value of scrap plastic drops as it becomes less competitive with new plastics. A drop in the value of scrap plastic cascades through the many links in globalised scrap commodity chains, sometimes causing scrap traders at various links to stop accepting certain types of materials, stop purchasing smaller loads, or even to cease door pickup service. Shifting regulations and politics also have large impacts on the trade (e.g. China’s recent bans on waste imports).

The inevitable disconnections between what is considered recyclable from a material-technological standpoint and what a constantly-shifting free market finds profitable to trade as scrap at any one point in time is a key contradiction in environmentally-oriented

recycling programmes everywhere (MacBride 2012; Reno 2016). Thus, although helpful and well intentioned, the pig-perspective guideline that is based on saleability inadvertently draws attention to the important issue of what happens to waste materials beyond the bin.

The contemporary movement towards implementing garbage sorting in China began as garbage bins with two sides—one for recyclables, one for other waste—first appeared on streets in select cities in the late 1990s. Later, these two-sided bins became standard around the country, but urban residents soon noticed that when garbage trucks came around, the contents of both bins got dumped back together. Such observations made it clear that the state had not invested in the full infrastructure needed to handle and process different kinds of post-consumer waste, and unregulated scrap trades remained the system through which waste materials of value, sorted out from materials of no value, were being processed into raw materials for production.



A standard two-sided bin on the streets of Kunming.
PC: Adam Liebman.

Some urbanites concerned with recycling for environmental reasons have figured out that the best practice is to leave obviously recyclable waste placed *outside* of bins, where it is easier for garbage pickers and waste workers to pick up and less likely to be contaminated by other waste. Or, alternatively,

they mimic their elders, whose embodied habits of frugality are motivated largely by past hardships, leading them to save sellable waste at home and periodically haul their loads to scrap traders themselves. Yet, due to concerns with the air and water pollution generated by the unregulated processing of scrap and discrimination against the rural migrants who ply scrap trades, younger urbanites do not necessarily consider scrap trading as fitting under the umbrella of ‘environmental protection’. These residents instead have been waiting for the infrastructure needed for the coveted citizen-government partnership waste management model. Indeed, many applaud the new garbage sorting policy.

The Revealing Differences between Garbage and Scrap

In the late 1990s, urban governments mostly withdrew from collecting and processing scrap, an economic sector that had been managed separately from sanitation since the 1950s (Goldstein 2006). Rural migrants filled the void as rapid urbanisation and development created opportunities to eke out a living from waste, and for a lucky few, to strike it rich. Across urban China, successful scrap traders often became a constituent part of the social fabric in the neighbourhoods where they plied their trade and in so doing were guided by factors exceeding economic instrumentality. In fact, a major challenge they have long faced is balancing social obligations with shifting economic realities. With slumping scrap commodity prices in the 2010s, scrap traders’ incomes have been negatively affected, straining their relationships in the neighbourhoods where they ply the trade.

In 2014, Adam spoke with a scrap trading couple who rented a relatively cheap storefront in an old neighbourhood in western Kunming. Falling scrap prices, combined with rising rent



Storefront scrap trading businesses in Kunming.
PC: Adam Liebman.

and other costs of living, were making it difficult for this couple to continue earning a modest living. Yet, they had been plying the trade in that neighbourhood for about eight years, and had good relationships with many of the older, low-income residents who lived nearby. They had always been willing to pick up scrap from residents' homes in order to gain more business and maintain relationships, but at the time when Adam conducted the interview, the husband told him that it was no longer worth his time and energy to pick up heavy piles of scrap from homes: 'Yesterday a resident living on the seventh floor across the street had me go move stuff [in a building without an elevator]. I moved over 40 kilograms of old books but in the end made only one "feather" [about 2 US cents] per kilogram. It's so tiring, but it's someone I know, and I would feel bad refusing.'

The husband thus complained that such a paltry economic gain did not outweigh the toll such work took on his aging body, but

that reciprocity and human sentiments (人情) compelled him to agree. Other traders had made the difficult decision, in light of falling prices, to cease offering such services. This upset some urban residents who were not motivated enough to treat their post-consumer waste with the attentive care necessary for maximising potential exchange values, but still enjoyed the convenience, sense of acting morally, and exchange of human sentiments involved with selling more crudely sorted waste to scrap traders. These situations illustrate the importance of frugality and close attention to waste, not just as embodied habits of waste-sorting, but also as forms of labour. Who, if anyone, does the labour of carefully and painstakingly collecting, sorting, and transporting scrap so that it does not simply become garbage has been a major question for many years.

Most scrap (as waste bearing value) is thus not generated ready-made as such. There is much attention, care, and labour needed to activate the potential exchange values in post-consumer waste. During another conversation, when I asked a scrap trader if she ever feels disrespected by other city residents, she replied that most people are quite good, but, ‘earlier this morning a man came with a bag of stuff to sell, and after looking inside I said to him that these things are a total mess, just like *garbage*, to which he replied: “aren’t you a *garbage* buyer” [with emphasis on the word “garbage”], showing that he looks down on us.’

The way in which the word *garbage* indicates disrespect in this context is worth a pause. Although both the terms ‘garbage’ (垃圾) and ‘scrap’ (废品) have mostly negative connotations in Chinese, the term ‘garbage’ is more disparaging. No scrap traders advertise that they buy garbage. They typically only use the term when emphasising how some people look down on them: ‘Some people think we are collecting *garbage*.’ Indeed, many scrap traders see themselves as crafty middle buyers who add value to the *goods* they buy through further breaking them down; sorting, packaging, and loading them up, and finally transporting them to larger scale scrap trading businesses or directly to factories.

This subtle difference in terms remains significant in two primary ways. First, the state’s efforts to promote *garbage* sorting conceals how many kinds of post-consumer waste can be imbued with scrap values and are often part of a broader value horizon that involves exchanging human sentiments and balancing relationships. Instead, ‘garbage’ suggests not only lack of value but also negative value, with the state therefore gaining the honour available as the entity that neutralises this environmental bad, accomplished in part by reallocating sorting labour to citizen-consumers.

At stake in the new garbage-sorting paradigm being piloted in Shanghai, and in similar projects that have come before it, is thus not only a redistribution of the money made

through scrap trades and other waste service providers. The new paradigm also involves redistributions of labour and a type of social capital that has been made available through the associations between garbage sorting and protecting the environment. Waste work, to the extent that its form remains contingent on shifts in urban governance structures and market conditions, has become a site of heightened contestation with multiple types of value in play. ■



Plague Doctor Mask. PC: Etsy.com.



Liu Shao-hua.

Epidemic Control in China

A Conversation with Liu Shao-hua

ZENG Jinyan

Liu Shao-hua earned her PhD in Sociomedical Sciences and Anthropology at Columbia University, and is now a Research Fellow at the Institute of Ethnology at the Academia Sinica, Taiwan. Her research takes AIDS, drug use, leprosy, and environmental issues as a lens for analysing the nature and trajectories of contemporary social change and individual life experiences and transformations in China and Taiwan. Liu also examines the history of health to understand the roles that external forces such as the state and the market play in shaping social change. She is the author of *Passage to Manhood: Youth Migration, Heroin, and AIDS in Southwest China* (Stanford University Press 2011) and its Chinese version *我的凉山兄弟：毒品、爱滋与流动青年* —published in both Taiwan (Qunxue Chubanshe 2013) and mainland China (Zhongyang Bianyi Chubanshe 2015). In recent years, she published *麻风医生与巨变中国：后帝国实验下的疾病隐喻与防疫历史* (*Leprosy Doctors in China's Post-Imperial Experimentation: Metaphors of a Disease and Its Control*, Weicheng Chubanshe 2018) and *人类学活在我的眼睛与血管里：从柬埔寨到中国，从这里到那里，一位人类学者的生命移动纪事* (*The Anthropology Living in My Eyes and Blood*, Chunshan Chubanshe 2019). This interview was conducted on 31 January 2020.

Zeng Jinyan: In the context of the outbreak of the Novel Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19), could you please outline China's mechanisms for the control of epidemics? What new features in the reactions of government, professionals, and the general public merit attention? What kind of role does technology play in this outbreak?

Liu Shao-hua: What new features? It is all about Chinese characteristics, isn't it? The whole world is following the news coming from China every day, and I believe everyone feels as if they were watching a circus. This is sadly preposterous. Wuhan has been locked down, many other places have been practically blocked, and various countries are taking action to shut down

their borders. All public transport in Wuhan has been suspended. The government is so ridiculous in thinking that it will all be fine if they simply lock up the people and isolate them. For both the central government and the Hubei provincial government, epidemic control seems to mean leaving the people to take care of themselves and simply stopping the disease from expanding to other places. Thus, they are taking epidemic control actions at the superficial level. But are the patients taken care of? Is the livelihood of the people taken care of?

Then, I see a lot of volunteers in China, for example the so-called ‘ferryman’ (摆渡人). They take the medical staff to and from work by bike, electric bicycle, or cars since there is no public transport. From this point of view, it can be quite touching to see the public response in China. I truly think these people are amazing, as it is very difficult to be a volunteer during the outbreak of a disease. Their families may strongly oppose their choices and everyone must be under massive pressure both physically and mentally. Shouldn’t these people be considered true patriots? Do you think it is also a kind of Chinese characteristic? I think so.

ZJY: In the past few years, many Chinese NGOs have been disbanded. A great number of activists—especially lawyers—were arrested, and under the new Overseas NGO Law the activities of international NGOs have been constrained, limiting the ability of domestic NGOs to access resources and opportunities for capacity building. The space for civil society has shrunk to the extreme. There has been a serious crackdown on the media, and investigative journalism has been significantly restricted. Under such circumstances, and in spite of the strict censorship, the outbreak of the disease has provoked a harsh backlash from the general public. I think that this backlash and criticism from the public is similar to what happened in the wake of the previous scandals that involved the Red Cross and government agencies after the Sichuan Earthquake. This means that the general public maintains its own critical ability. Nevertheless, these ridiculous official responses to social emergencies keep happening, and they are even getting worse.

LSH: I think we could say that the Chinese government is treating the public reaction as a kind of ‘bacteria’, and then desperately increasing the dose of antibiotics to fight it. But this kind of control is bound to fail as the response is going to mutate. So, this time we see a lot of things that are absurd just like before or even more. We cannot say that the reaction of the Chinese people went through a dramatic change compared to before, but can we say it did not change at all? No. Under censorship, articles published for public discussion last shorter than the virus. They are soon deleted because of censorship and then somebody else reposts them, and the cycle goes on again and again. This means that inside China there are many people

who have different opinions, and they are going to express them and to take action. So, actually outsiders like us cannot stop, we need to continue to keep track and be vocal. Because even if the people inside have no way to make their own voice heard, we can take action to repost the words everywhere.

You asked about the role of technology. In the past, we would not have had any idea about what the reality of a disaster was. Now, no matter how strict the online blockade is, something always passes through. I feel technology is a bit funny this time. China always boasts of its leading role in AI, 5G, electric cars, and all kinds of technologies, and of its monetary wealth. So, why have all these technologies failed to effectively maintain the livelihood of the people during the lockdown of the cities?

ZJY: During this outbreak, it seems that technology failed to play a crucial role in supporting public management, the livelihood of the people, or the arrangement of medical service. But perhaps the government was well-informed, but nevertheless chose not to disclose the information?

LSH: Monitoring requires technology. However, why didn't the big data technology function well in monitoring this outbreak? It would be very easy to observe the trend from the functional perspective of epidemiological big data. But those people used the data for publishing purposes, caring nothing for this trend or for public health. Everyone is criticising the Center for Disease Control (CDC) at the central level, saying that they only thought about publishing articles for themselves. What I want to ask is how big is the CDC in China? I mean, how big is their power in political decision making? Did they dare to conceal the outbreak without any command from the higher leadership?

ZJY: This point is closely related to how you divide time by using the term 'post-imperial' in your book on leprosy doctors. It is first and foremost a political issue, rather than a mere medical problem. So, what does 'post-imperial' mean? If the period between 1949-78 is the 'post-imperial' era, what is the period after 1978? How does it affect the epidemic-prevention work at this moment?

LSH: In my book I explained that this is not merely an issue of medical service or public health. Fundamentally, it is a problem of sociopolitical history. As I wrote in the book: 'When the world was entering into the post-colonial era, by enforcing the mandatory socialist policy, the CCP administration made the country step into a post-imperial mental state, resolutely and quickly dispelling the influence of the old and new imperial (anti-imperialism and anti-feudalism) and the influence of

colonialism (church, culture).’ In the context of the current outbreak of COVID-19, I think the implication is that this kind of post-imperial mentality (as a way of thinking and spiritual disposition) has never disappeared. China’s ‘post-imperial’ has never been detached from the imperial underpinnings, but it has two layers.

When we talk about post-colonialism and post-imperialism, there is a theoretical orientation which states that it is impossible to get rid of the colonial-imperialist architecture. First, in the earlier regime, ‘imperial’ refers to the continuation of the legacies of the Republic of China (1912–49), which included influences from traditional China and the West, as well as the church. Second, after 1978 ‘imperial’ needs to be read in the context of the new wave of globalisation, with the shadow of the Soviet Union cast over China’s institutional settings resulting in a bipolar character. On the one hand, China is pursuing globalisation—the ‘imperial’ standardisation. That can explain in particular, why there is a group of people, including those from CDC, desperate to publish their research of COVID-19 in world-class journals. To some extent, this is exactly the new imperial architecture described by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, which I discussed in *Leprosy Doctors in China’s Post-imperial Experimentation*. On the other hand, as I mentioned earlier, China is still maintaining the ‘post-imperial’ mentality. Especially in the public disclosure of the outbreak, it upholds such a mentality. It is a very schizophrenic bipolar manifestation, and I do not think it has changed.

ZJY: So, the ‘Chinese dream’ is an ‘imperial dream’?

LSH: Yes, the point I am making is that China has never broken away from the imperial. It fully eliminated the influence of imperialism, especially American influence, through its adoption of socialism. But, in fact, it aimed to build up an empire on the model of the Soviet Union, another Western imperial power. It followed the model of the Soviet Union in every aspect to promote its own ‘post-imperial’ political and technological reform.

At the end of the 1950s, the relations between the two countries deteriorated, and in the early 1960s there was the Sino-Soviet split. Chinese scholars often deny the Soviet influence upon the Chinese system during that period. In China, not many people are interested in doing historical research on this and instead choose to ignore it.

The full history of that period, especially regarding the influence on the formation of the healthcare system, may not easily be seen today, and it seems that nobody takes it seriously.

However, that decade had a huge impact on the history of China's healthcare and epidemic-prevention primarily in two aspects. First, in the mechanism for the prevention of epidemics. China had a Soviet-style healthcare system which included many different epidemic-prevention stations (EPSs) specialised in different diseases, and it was only later that this was transformed into the American-style system of CDCs with a unified management scheme. I believe that the reactions of the government to COVID-19 and the chaos within the government agencies are related to the incomplete transformation of the system. But we still need a lot of internal data to be able to research the power, positions, arrangements, coordination mechanisms, and resource allocation within this system. The Soviet influence on the public health system was very obvious before 2000, but the degree of the transformation to the American-style system differs from place to place. Huge differences can be found between and within the central level, provincial level, city level, or even in the municipalities. I strongly agree with what Dr Zuo-Feng Zhang, the Associate Dean of the School of Public Health and Professor in Epidemiology at UCLA, said recently: that the CDC transformation in Shanghai was quite complete and that this is the reason why Shanghai could successfully curb the outbreak of SARS. Shanghai was also the first provincial municipality to declare that leprosy had been eliminated. Now, the emphasis should not be on the word 'Soviet', but on how this old system has come to develop Chinese characteristics.

Second, the Soviet influence on China's healthcare system can also be found in the medical training system—particularly in the levels, structures, and scale of training. The professional education is designed in a general, fast, and low-level manner, which has resulted in a lot of unqualified health workers being able to obtain a medical license. The Soviet Union strongly emphasised the need to bring up mid-level professionals, and it was not the only country to do that. In the first half of the twentieth century the League of Nations also suggested that the Kuomintang Administration actively promote the medical training system in this manner. After 1949, in line with the Soviet model the PRC also started to train the people at the primary level. There are some tables in my book that describe the shifting trend in the number of leprosy doctors and leprosy-prevention entities (including the number of leper villages). We can see from these tables that after 1949 the number of high-level professionals did not increase much, whereas the number of health workers at the primary level and middle level was boosted. So, the beginning of this trend was the exact consequence of a policy based on the Soviet model.

China started to transform its epidemic-prevention system into the American-style CDC model around the year 2000. At that time, there were already a lot of clinics and EPSs, and all of them had to be consolidated under the CDC. Many people in the old systems were unaccustomed to or even worried about the central management of the CDC, including regarding decisions on resource allocation. Before the reform, each EPS was in charge of a single or several kinds of diseases, and the resources allocated to it would be distributed equally among different diseases by the EPS itself. In the new system this was centralised. So, which disease would be deemed to be most urgent at the central level? For example, AIDS was in the spotlight for a period of time, and all the money went to AIDS control. Another example is leprosy, which was thought to be eliminated in China and was thus not allocated financial support. As leprosy was an overlooked disease and the government never disclosed the places where leprosy had been eliminated but later reappeared, many leprosy doctors were reluctant to be merged. They thought: if everyone in China believed that leprosy had been eliminated in the whole country, who would care about the disease? Leprosy doctors in Sichuan province, for example, were resistant towards the merger and to this day continue to carry out their work in the dermatology institutes. From one system to another, there are a lot of internal oscillations, and there may be a lot of institutional deficiencies as China is way too big and highly hierarchical.

ZJY: So, the initial Soviet-style epidemic-prevention system was transformed into an American-style CDC model, but the work environment and political environment in China is different from that of the United States.

LSH: Yes, transparency is the key problem. The model introduced may not be compatible with the local political and cultural environment. We have stepped into a globalisation regime led by the West, especially by the United States, and many countries and regions are inevitably involved in this process. The European countries, including France, have also adopted this American CDC model. In particular, its performance in the several major outbreaks of infectious diseases around the twentieth century made it a dominant model of disease control around the world. In addition, this kind of disease control has become increasingly reliant on big data, with a centre for data collection, monitoring, and command. If adopted by a democratic country, it would be subjected to supervision through democratic mechanisms. However, in China the centre

is in charge of everything, including all resource collection, allocation, and decision-making. And there is no mechanism for monitoring, supervising, or correcting mistakes.

The central CDC concentrates all the resources and information related to the life and health of the public, but there is no mechanism to supervise it. The only institution that can supervise it is the higher political hierarchy, which the people have to believe and obey. It is a terrible thing. There has been a lot of criticism directed at the central CDC for rushing to publish their own research. Dr Zuo-Feng Zhang also indirectly criticised this phenomenon, and asked whether it is more important to publish excellent papers or to use this information for epidemic-prevention.

ZJY: When it comes to professional ethics and the political culture in the workplace, based on my own work experience in China, it seems that things like political correctness, 'face', and exchanges of favours take precedence over considerations of professional development. A culture that fails to face facts with honesty and fails to show respect to professionalism has become the normal state of the authoritarian politics that is now permeating every aspect of the society. Instead of being limited to political decision making, this culture has been actively imposed on the daily life of the people.

Stigmatisation of an epidemic disease is often intertwined with lack of transparency and poor decision-making, which prioritise political considerations and echo the cultural metaphor of the disease. When it comes to the field of epidemic prevention, this sociopolitical culture further marginalises epidemic prevention work, exposes professionals to high risks, hinders collaboration in epidemic control, and brings huge damage to the public. This can also be seen in the widespread usage of the word 'Wuhan Pneumonia' (武汉肺炎) by media, governmental bodies, and NGOs.

LSH: The term 'Wuhan Virus' or 'China Virus' was also used by the World Health Organisation at the initial stage. When I saw it, I sighed. I believe that it was based on technical convenience and they did not think about the implications. They did not intend to stigmatise anybody; they named the disease after the place where it first broke out and then corrected it soon afterwards. But if everybody became familiar with the old term, who would remember the new one? It may be pointless to change the name if people's views do not change.

This is a historical lesson. From the very beginning we should not name diseases this way, and the media, governments, NGOs, as well the general public all over the world should have restrained themselves. Even if the name is changed afterwards, the stigma is unlikely to be easily removed. For example, many Wuhan people have left the city, and people do not get sick

because there are people from Wuhan around. However, the lockdown of the city associates the people from this city with the virus and disease no matter where they went, no matter where they lived, and no matter whom they had contact with in the past. We can see how the stigma is integrated into the implications of the Chinese government's lockdown measures at the grassroots, and how it devastatingly affects ordinary people's lives, especially those from the lower rungs of society. It is the same as when people used to associate people from Henan with AIDS, which was a terrible problem that made it very difficult for citizens from that province to pursue education, jobs, medical treatment, and development opportunities. Also, globally it is obvious that there are more heterosexuals than homosexuals with AIDS, but people still think that AIDS is first and foremost a gay problem. And now, in some countries the Chinese are discriminated against as if they were a synonym for the novel coronavirus. It is a matter of the people's viewpoint, not a scientific fact.

ZJY: Now many places have been taking measures to stop and check people from Hubei. What does this mean from an epidemiological perspective?

LSH: From an epidemiological perspective, this is an unprecedented quarantine in terms of scale, and it seems that historically only concentration camps reached such a size. Although there were cities in northeast China and other places that used to be locked down during outbreaks of the plague, the density of the population and the size of the city were very different in the past. When the science was not so advanced, for example, the European migrants who went to New York would be temporarily quarantined on Ellis Island. And Leprosy patients have historically been kept away from the people by being isolated on islands, in mountains, or valleys.

ZJY: What do you think Wuhan could have done differently? What can China do now?

LSH: Quarantine measures in hospitals are necessary in a reasonable public health system with open and trustworthy mechanisms. For example, visiting patients is now forbidden in the Taipei Veterans General Hospital. No more than two people are allowed to accompany each patient to the hospital and every person showing up at the hospital has to wear a mask. In Taiwan, healthy people are urged not to wear masks if they are not visiting special places or hospitals. Classification and division of work should be immediately carried out among hospitals. For example, patients with critical conditions need

to be sent to the hospitals with better facilities, and special hospitals should be tasked with referrals and taking care of the needs of the patients with specific diseases. These are the ABCs of public health.

In certain cases people should be self-quarantined for a certain period of time at home and checked. Given the preciseness of China's population survey and the strict measures of control, it was surprising that they failed to visit every household to investigate and supervise at the outset. These measures are not uncommon in public epidemic control and have been applied in other places. But in China, the system just panicked. I think these people have not received any training about the proper conduct in this situation and have no idea who is at higher risk and who is not. They may not even be clear about their own information either.

So, in this case the official attitude towards the outbreak is to make sure that the residents of Wuhan cannot go out to spread the disease by locking them down. This mentality of not caring if you live or die as long as you don't come out to infect me is the worst and is not confined to the officials. The scope of the red line could be very large. But how can the government blockade a metropolis like Wuhan, with a population of ten million? In this big city, how will the government take care of the physical and psychological states of those who are not infected? What kind of aftereffects will there be?

ZJY: The point is that in the context of China's political culture, this mentality is not confined to political decision-making—it is everyday life for the majority of people. In this blockade, we have seen a lot that is primitive, brutal, violating human rights, and threatening the basic livelihood of the people. So, in this case, is trust the most absent thing?

LSH: I don't think it is just about trust. I have mentioned in my book that the Chinese people are either actively or passively cooperating with this kind of political culture. And since it lacks ethical norms, people are not responsible for anything or anyone, including their own integrity.

Like those people in the CDC who firstly published their research on COVID-19 in *The Lancet* and the *New England Journal of Medicine* in early and mid-January, for instance. Although I do not believe they were in a position of power to withhold information about the epidemic outbreak, none of them showed any conscience or stood up to reveal the truth when they published articles in those top journals. These people, from top to bottom and not just the people of the CDC—because the data was collected and sent from the bottom as well—were desperately trying to put their names on the articles.

There was a list of names. So, I have no idea how many people already knew about the outbreak of the disease from the local to the central level. There might also be people who knew and whose name was not on the list.

Do those people know nothing about professional ethics or the basic morality of being human? They are intellectuals—they have the ability to communicate internationally since they can write academic English. How could they be so narrow-minded and so ignorant about the international norms? *The New England Journal of Medicine* should have withdrawn these kinds of articles later because they seriously violate research ethics. This is akin to improper acquisition of information. For example, if you are doing an experiment with a patient and know that his or her life is in danger, will you use your experimental drug to improve your professional reputation, or will you save the patient's life by immediately using an already-existing drug?

ZJY: Your 2018 work *Leprosy Doctors in China's Post-Imperial Experimentation: Metaphors of a Disease and Its Control* deals with the history of the control of epidemics in contemporary China (1949–78). You spent over ten years writing about the life of a group of leprosy doctors, as well as about epidemic-control policies and practices through the lens of politics (i.e. nation, class, religious politics), science (i.e. the development of biomedicine and education), and social culture (i.e. the stigma and emotional labour brought about by the metaphors of disease and its control practices). You wrote the book in Chinese and first published it in Taiwan. As many of the leprosy doctors you communicated with were growing old and some of them had passed away, you were hoping that they would read the manuscript and give you feedback even before it was finished. It was also a way to preserve the history of this group of individuals. However, this book is not really known in the English-speaking world, and it has not been published in mainland China as its contents failed to get passed the censors.

LSH: I think there is obviously interest in the history of epidemic-control in China in the English-speaking world, especially in academia—so why did I write it in Chinese first? Primarily this was because the historical materials and narratives I used made it difficult to render the book in English. One of my main goals was to preserve these historical materials, and translating them directly into English would have required simplification as English readers do not need so many historical details. Besides, those English readers who engage in China Studies and who are interested in detailed historical materials are very likely to be proficient in reading Chinese.

ZJY: Is this situation common in Chinese academia? Is it a consequence of the pressure on young researchers to publish any piece of material as soon as they collect it, especially in English?

LSH: This is the situation for those of us in non-English-speaking academia: we need to try to make the book readable for the people in the English-speaking world. It is also the current trend in academia more generally that people are pushed to publish every piece of material as soon as they collect it—a situation which we can describe as ‘slight, thin, short, and small’ (轻, 薄, 短, 小). Any finding is quickly published, and it seems that it is left only to the historian to do in-depth and difficult studies. Some people question why I conduct research in Chinese, why I go into so much depth. Considering that my studies cannot be published in mainland China, they consider them ‘useless’. It is precisely because Chinese scholars cannot do that, that those of us outside the Chinese system we need to do it. Chinese scholars and the scholars within the system are more likely to have access to rich materials, as they may have different kinds of interpersonal channels and sources of data. The problem is that they would not publish these materials at all, as they neither dare to think that way nor dare to write about it. Many outstanding Chinese scholars, I believe, have plenty of materials but cannot publish them. What these scholars can do may be to collect materials or histories, but they have no way to write these things down. The few people who can write and publish probably do so outside China, so they are like us, outsiders of the Chinese system. So those of us outside the system have a duty to write.

There are some Western scholars who cooperate with China for some resource exchange and might be able to obtain some material from within the system (for instance in the medical and healthcare fields). Due to their research scope, their findings based on these materials would not be much different from those Chinese researchers.

ZJY: This is very sad.

LSH: Yes, it is sad. Moreover, being unable to analyse the political culture or politics, they can only make relatively technical descriptions. This may also be seen as a division of labour; that is, at least other researchers can cite their data. If I had written the book *Leprosy Doctors in China's Post-imperial Experimentation* in English first, my informants could not

have had a chance to read it, and many materials could not have been covered. For example, when I wrote my first book *Passage to Manhood*, my informants—who were members of an ethnic minority—did not read Chinese either, so it did not make any difference to show them the Chinese or English version. However, things were different for the interviewees of *Leprosy Doctors*. These doctors were intellectuals, and they were growing old, so I had to write the Chinese version first for two reasons: first, to preserve this history; second, to give it to them and discuss.

ZJY: Besides the impressive knowledge and depth of thought, I found your *Leprosy Doctors* book very healing. It is very human, has a power to assuage the pain. In this outbreak of COVID-19, we have seen many people, especially medical staff, who make many sacrifices and take considerable risks to keep working and providing services. In the meantime, we have also seen a lot of video clips and photos that indicate great dangers and a severe lack of crucial supplies. The doctors and nurses, including family members of my friends, have to work on the front lines, even if they themselves are running a fever or lack proper protection. So, they are taking high risks in either active or passive ways. In Hong Kong, meanwhile, new unions have quickly organised in different industries to negotiate and struggle with the weakened government to protect the medical staff and prevent an outbreak of the epidemic in the city. This outbreak of the coronavirus has highlighted how crude and barbaric the living and working conditions are for us Chinese people. My feelings on this matter are complicated. For one thing, I deeply respect those people who are trying their best to provide professional or volunteer services in spite of the huge risks. But on the other hand, it is exactly these professionals who easily fall victim to the political culture. They are unlikely to be able to defend themselves at a time of crisis and they are suppressed when they take action. In your book, you write about the personal life history of leprosy doctors who were carrying out their work under the pressures of stigma and a lack of resources. How did these doctors, epidemic-prevention workers, and patients develop their agency in an extremely suppressive political environment?

LSH: I would like to primarily talk about senior leprosy doctors in my book. The point that I need to stress is that these doctors were very professional. What I want to say is different from the official narratives and discourses in mainland China, and this can be called the ‘suppressed history’. Many of these senior medical staff or their teachers were trained before 1949. There was a saying around the late 1970s and early 1980s that university graduates before the Cultural Revolution had real scholarship. Even in those extremely difficult times when intellectuals were marginalised, they maintained high professional standards. Being marginalised, they had no chance to join the political battle, as they themselves were the targets of the struggle and had to go back to work after being attacked. In those circumstances, being able to work was a shelter for

these intellectuals. So, they focussed on their professional work, dealing with a group of people—lepers—who were marginalised as well. They concentrated on the treatment and prevention of the disease to explore scientific questions and to gain a sense of achievement—even if these achievements were framed by the government as relief for the vast suffering of China's rural underclass or other similar patriotic propaganda. I think it is a very critical point.


ZJY: Now, the environment in China is different, at least the degree of social openness is much different. It seems to me that people would switch to another position, if they have the chance.

LSH: The majority of the leprosy doctors who were trained after 1949 shifted to other positions. It was the group of older doctors who stuck to their posts. So, as I mentioned in the book, after the 1980s, these old doctors still worked in these positions. But as they were accustomed to maintaining a low profile, they were rarely known by the public. On the contrary, some doctors who joined later were very high profile, and were known by many and were even falsely credited for all the achievements in epidemic-prevention in China. So, I felt quite uneasy when I wrote about the story after the 1980s, because these facts are still suppressed by those in high positions.

ZJY: Is there anything else you would like to add?

LSH: Just one more thing. It would be a terrible thing if China's medical training system included only skills but no ethics. ■

(Translated by ZENG Zhen)

A stylized, hand-drawn illustration in brown and black ink. It depicts a wooden door with a handle and a person's legs at the bottom. The door is on the right side of the image, and the legs are at the bottom. The central text is on a yellow background.

FOCUS

The Work of Arts

Aesthetics and Subaltern
Politics in China

IMAGES

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Amateur Art Practice and the Everyday in Socialist China

Li Fenglan, *Spring Hoeing*, 1975. PC: Chinese posters. net

A. C. BAECKER

This essay examines amateur art practice during the socialist period in China. It argues that socialist amateur art practice not only changed the class and labour relations that had previously defined the fine arts, but also converted the expert and professional cultures of the fine arts into a grassroots practice of the everyday. Originating from small art study groups at industrial and agricultural sites, amateur artists met to create images depicting their labour and lifestyles. The result was a practice that challenged the art academy as a legitimising site of training, evacuated concepts of artistic genius and technical accomplishment, and embraced media primarily oriented toward the public, as opposed to the market.

In 1975, the émigré writer and artist Chiang Yee returned to China, the country of his birth. He had inadvertently been away for over four decades, separated from his family by the outbreak of war after leaving for London in 1933. In the years that followed, the possibility of returning seemed vanishingly distant, and Chiang spent decades trying to reconcile with the painful fact that he might never see the wife and four young children he had left behind again. Chiang poured his feelings of loneliness and alienation into writing and painting about his experiences abroad, works that were eventually published as a popular illustrated travelogue series called ‘The Silent Traveller’. Written from the perspective of

a self-described ‘homesick Easterner’, many credited Chiang’s best-selling series with making Chinese culture and art accessible to mid-century Anglo-American audiences.

When Richard Nixon made a state visit to Beijing in 1972, suddenly returning to China seemed possible, as restrictions around foreign travel loosened. Chiang was one of many overseas Chinese who were eager to return. Even after four decades away, he still held tightly to his Chinese identity and was keen to reconnect not only with his family, but also with his country of origin. He had watched from a distance as a new state with a utopian vision for the future had been established, one that entailed radical and revolutionary reorganisations of life and society. Chiang ‘was so Anxious and curious to learn about these great changes,’ Chiang applied for a visa in 1974. In April 1975, he finally returned for a two month-long tour of the country after 42 years away.

During his trip, Chiang visited Hu Xian, a rural village on the outskirts of Xi’an, Shaanxi province. Hu Xian had become well-known both within and outside the People’s Republic of China (PRC) for the artistic accomplishment of its amateur artists, farmers who in their ‘spare time’ (业余) off from agricultural labour painted colourful and captivating works that depicted life in the countryside. Although Chiang and the Hu Xian farmers were separated by many things, they shared a common passion for art, and Chiang spent the day getting to know them.

Chiang was impressed by what he saw, and recorded his experience in Hu Xian in an account of his trip. First, the existence of ‘peasant-artists’ in the PRC was in and of itself a revelation, as ‘a peasant who could paint ... was unheard of in the past, for in the old days, few of them could have any education, let alone be taught how to handle a brush’ (Chiang 1977, 76–77). But Chiang found their art exceptional too. Their works ‘possessed the gift of rendering their subject matter explicitly with artistic arrangement,’ which Chiang compared favourably to iconic pastoral works

in the Western canon, such as Jean-François Millet’s ‘The Gleaners’ and Vincent van Gogh’s ‘The Potato Eaters’ (Chiang 1977, 77). He spent his afternoon in Hu Xian deep in conversation with fellow artists.

What Chiang witnessed in Hu Xian was perhaps the peak of an artistic practice that had, at that point, been cultivated for decades in the PRC: amateur art practice, known variously as 业余美术创作, 业余美术活动, 工农兵美术, and 农民画. Today, if it is remembered at all, the amateur art movement of the socialist period is conflated simply with peasant art, but in fact amateur art practice was pervasive across the working class in China during the socialist period. Socialist amateur art practice had its roots in pre-1949 political organising and production practices, beginning with the encouragement of workers organised by the Chinese Communist Party to draw sketches and cartoons (漫画) criticising counterproductive work habits or depicting ideal ones.

As more amateurs became involved in making art, the practice shifted from a critique of production methods into a broader socialist cultural praxis. Socialist amateur art practice functioned not only as a means for changing the class and labour relations that had previously been dominant in the fine arts, but also as a strategy for converting the expert and professional cultures of the fine arts into a grassroots practice of the everyday. Borrowing the historian Michael Denning’s concept of the ‘labouring of culture’, I argue that amateur art practice similarly ‘laboured’ the fine arts by locating the arts within the social relations of the labouring masses (工农兵群众). The result was a practice that challenged the authority of the art academy as a legitimising site of training, evacuated the concepts of creative genius and technical accomplishment that had previously been linked with the recognition of an artist, and embraced media and subject matter primarily oriented toward the public, as opposed to the market.

The Labouring of Fine Art

Socialist amateur art practice is typically dated to the year 1958, and understood in the literature as a programme initiated as cultural handmaiden to the economic campaigns of the Great Leap Forward. Ellen Johnston Laing (1985), for example, describes what she calls ‘peasant art’ as a programme to ‘immortalize the positive benefits of the Great Leap and the commune in stories, poems, plays, and pictures,’ while the historian Duan Jingli (2001), also interested primarily in peasant art, dates the earliest peasant art study groups to the year 1956 in two locations: one in Pi county, Jiangsu province, and the other in Shulu, Hebei province. Yet it would be more

accurate to think of the economic campaigns of the Great Leap Forward as handmaiden to its cultural programmes; after all, as historian Maurice Meisner points out, when the Great Leap Forward was first announced, it consisted largely of ambitious designs for Maoist cultural change, with its signature economic policies—the formation of the people’s communes (人民公社) and steel production targets—only following later. Archival sources indicate that amateur art had been practiced prior to 1958 in the form of art study groups (业余美术创作组), in which workers belonging to the same work unit formed small groups that met regularly to draw and comment on each others’ work, often under the guidance of an experienced artist.

As social formations, professionalism (专) and amateurism (业余) refer to the division of life into working time and non-working time.



Hu Xian painters at work on a wall painting.
Photo from the 1976 Arts Council of Great Britain
catalogue of the Hu Xian show.

The two work in tandem with one another, ‘locked in a symbiotic relationship [mitigating] the divide between work and freedom ... The absence of one defines and imbricates the other’ (Zimmerman 1995, 6). During the socialist period in the PRC, the professional/amateur dichotomy also referred to the distinction between a trained and untrained artist, itself essentially a class distinction: art academies were the single most important site of legitimisation for aspiring artists, and they were attended almost exclusively by wealthy urban Chinese. In its attempt to eliminate the barriers to art, socialist amateur art practice took the fine arts out of the academy and centred it at the grassroots level: in the military ranks, in the factory, and in the commune. By changing the scale at which art was produced, amateur art practice transformed the fine arts from the highly-individualised, specialised pursuit of an elite, small, and credentialed community, to a mass activity built up from the bottom level of society.

The May 1954 issue of *Fine Arts* (美术), the PRC’s flagship art publication, includes an article entitled ‘Art Creation Activities by Shanghai Workers’ that discusses amateur art groups formed among workers in the Shanghai region. The author, Li Cunsong, notes that following Liberation in 1949, sketching and painting had become popular with workers who had ‘turned over’ (翻身), who recognised it as a powerful tool for articulating their new socialist consciousness and sharing it with others (Li 1954). Furthermore, because ‘workers’ artistic output (工人创作) is derived from production needs,’ their art particularly excelled at identifying undesirable working habits. Li describes a cartoon by one worker that satirised production methods favouring quantity over quality, for example. By drawing attention to problematic production methods, amateur worker art played a vital role in improving the production process.

The number of amateur art groups established skyrocketed in late 1958 in tandem with 下生活 (‘sent down’, or ‘entering life’) policies, which sent trained artists to the

countryside and embedded them in worker and farmer communities to ‘learn from life’. Over 30 separate worker, farmer, and soldier art communities rose to fame from the late 1950s to late 1970s for their ongoing amateur art activities, earning coverage in national newspapers including the *People’s Daily*, *People’s Liberation Army Daily*, and *Guangming Daily*, while their artwork was displayed at museums and culture halls (文化馆) across the country. Because amateur art groups had access to very different material resources than urban, professional, and academy-trained artists, artwork made by amateur artists embraced low-cost materials that were easily made and displayed: sketches, cartoons, painting, and ‘wall art’ (壁画), or outdoor murals painted on the sides of homes and local buildings.

A 1958 profile of two rural artists in *Fine Arts* describes how farmers Zhang Shaonan and Zhang Penqing enrich the surrounding communities with art. Described as broad-shouldered and barefooted, with rough hands and strong legs from working in the fields, in their time away from regular farming responsibilities the two Zhangs frequently travel to neighbouring villages on invitation to create art in situ, drawing on communal blackboards, painting murals on village walls, and designing works of propaganda. Unlike the usual artist, the two Zhangs ‘don’t have the disgraceful framework (臭架子) of the old intellectuals,’ and neither are they self-promoting (Zou 1958). Instead, these two farmers from East village in Zhuji, Zhejiang province, are able to create images that resonate with locals owing to their authenticity as peasants (地地道道的农民) and authoritative first-hand knowledge of rural life.

Creating new socialist art meant creating new socialist artists, and amateur art practice played a significant role in challenging the traditional concept of the artist. Where the artist was typically seen as an urban, male, and educated member of the upper classes, amateur art practice asked for members of the masses to fill the role, challenging the idea that one needed to belong to a certain class

or gender to be an artist. During the socialist period, the distinction between professional and amateur increasingly came into question. The ‘red and expert’ initiatives of the late 1950s attempted to resolve the long-standing conflict between mental and manual labour through a democratisation of education and technical expertise (Andreas 2009; Schmalzer 2019). Even the term ‘artist’ was revised: where ‘artist’ was usually variously rendered as 美术家, 艺术家, or 画家, the shared suffix 家, denoting an elevated professional status, was replaced by a new suffix—工作者, or ‘the worker’. Thus, the Artist (美术家) was reclassified as an art worker (美术工作者), signalling ‘the intention to redefine the identity of artists and writers as part of the working class’ and to make cultural work legible as labour, as opposed to an act of creative genius (Geng 2018, 2).

In order to accommodate the amateur artist, who is coded explicitly as a member of the labouring masses, it was necessary to adjust the cultural formation that produced and glorified the artist. Accordingly, concepts of the artist as a creative genius began to shift to accommodate the legitimacy of the amateur. For example, in 1955 the painter and woodcut artist Li Qun criticised the concept of genius (天才) as it relates to the fine arts, writing that genius is not an innate hereditary quality, and that it is not pre-ordained at birth. ‘Does [genius] rely on having a superior physiology (生理)?’, asks Li. ‘In reality, it’s clear that the existence of genius is inseparable from its cultivation, from limitless loyalty to the people, from scientific working methods, from the ingenuity of labour from the difficulty of hard work, and the relationship with the people’ (Li 1955, 39–40). Genius, Li argued, was not a product of a unique and eccentric mind, but rather a matter of individual devotion to *métier*, reflecting a view that grew in currency as the 1950s led into the 1960s.

Increasingly, the pre-existing concepts of genius were identified as harmful, a cultural formation that explicitly excluded the masses from being recognised in their own right as

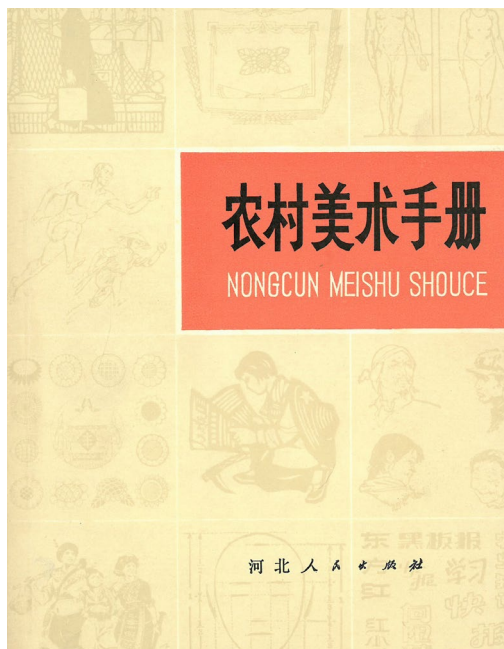
creative authors. Technique (技术) emerged as a crucial junction at which trained and untrained artists could meet and conduct exchange. Again, Li Qun questioned the traditional assumptions around what constituted good art in the appraisal of amateur art: ‘The problem is that there are some people who cannot perceive the strengths of even works [by workers, peasants, and soldiers] that are overwhelmingly good ... and this obviously involves issues relating to the standards of methodologies (标准的方法) by which we appreciate art’ (Li 1958, 8–9). Li Qun proposed that the typical standards by which art had been evaluated were in need of radical rethinking. ‘The idea of supposed artistry (艺术性) is problematic,’ as it does not account for the ideological message or persuasive power of a work. If ‘the spirit of the content ... and the spirit of the times’ are discarded and a work of art is appraised by technical skill alone, ‘then you can only come to a negative conclusion’ (Li 1958, 8–9).

Yet at the same time, the possession of the technical skills necessary to create art, such as line drawing, enlargement, shading, volume, the use of colour, and realistic depiction of anatomy, expression, and likeness—were not seen as the dividing line between professional and amateur artists. For Li Qun, a work was strong not because it depicted its subject with anatomical accuracy and verisimilitude, but because the viewer comes away with a clear sense of the image’s narrative. Taking a sketch by a soldier as example, Li Qun praised the work’s ‘exemplary concept and arrangement’, explaining that even though the work had ‘inaccuracies’, ‘it doesn’t use illustration to explain how life is, but rather generalizes (概括) life with an image’ (Li 1958, 8).

Li Qun and other supporters of amateur art blamed a lack of access to adequate opportunities for training in fine art technique. ‘There are those with conservative thinking who have always felt that workers and peasants lack artistic talent, and that fine art shouldn’t be theatrical or performative, or contain themes that appeal easily to the masses,’ wrote



Yu Simeng, 'The Political Commissar Pays a Visit to the Company', sketch reproduced in *Fine Arts* no. 11, 1958, p. 8.



Cover of *Guide to Rural Art*, a handbook meant to instruct rural artists published by Hebei People's Press in 1975.

Huang Dingjun, head of the Hubei Province Mass Culture Palace (Huang 1958, 36). Li Fenglan, the Hu Xian farmer and mother of four who went on to become perhaps the most celebrated amateur artist of the period, saw herself as proof positive that the peasants could make art just as well as anyone else. Describing the prejudice she had faced from those with 'conservative thinking' who thought her gender and class disqualified her from practicing art, she asserted that: 'We lower-middle peasants (贫下中农) are entirely capable of learning the skills needed to make art. It's only necessary to have revolutionary ambitions, to be willing to study diligently, and train hard' (Li 1974). Li Fenglan understood artistic technique as a modular skill that can be acquired through regular practice, regardless of background or preparation. 'These basic skills don't drop

down from heaven, and they aren't endowed at birth. They have to be learned from life, from the masses, and from art practice' (Li 1974).

The Antidote to Most Chinese Art

The amateur art practice of the socialist period was so closely associated with the Cultural Revolution that its repudiation extends well beyond temporal boundaries of the period. Gradually, the term 'amateur' (业余) has disappeared from discussion of art by lower-class labourers, collapsing a widespread national art practice into an exclusively 'peasant' practice. This is compounded by the celebrity of the Hu Xian painters, whose work



Ma Yali, *Brigade Chicken Farm*, 1973.
PC: Chinese posters.net

was well-received in international exhibitions held from New York to London and Paris during the 1970s, as well as the consolidation of 'peasant art' into the revival of 'folk art' during the Reform era. And just as leftists felt betrayed by the Cultural Revolution, so too has that view extended to the history of China's visual arts. In 1984, the art historian Ellen Johnston Laing argued that a stylistic analysis of the most prominent works by Hu Xian peasant painters revealed that those works had, in fact, been largely executed by professional artists, whose contributions were minimised in the service of a pro-peasant political agenda. Laing concludes that the concept of an autonomous and authentic Hu Xian peasant art was—like so much of the socialist period—a fraud.

Laing's indictment of peasant art practice remains the defining work of English-language scholarship on the Hu Xian phenomenon, and

today even those who visited Hu Xian at the time question the legitimacy of their memories. As a student of Chinese language at the Beijing Languages Institute in the summer of 1975, the art historian Craig Clunas—like Chiang Yee—had the chance to visit Hu Xian, meeting and observing its artists. He memorialised the trip in his diary, writing: 'This stuff is just the antidote to most Chinese art. When you see what the peasants are actually painting, your faith revives' (Clunas 1999, 53). Views of the period and the art it produced have changed so much that Clunas now cringes at his earlier assessment: 'My enthusiasm for this work ... was fulsome to the point of embarrassment' (Clunas 1999, 53).

But ignoring amateur art practice's legacies—and, more broadly speaking, the cultural legacies of the socialist period—creates a wilfully partial history that impoverishes our

understanding of the contemporary. Amateur art practice of the socialist period constituted an ambitious reorientation of fine art practice, transforming it from the specialised labour of elite professionals into a productive everyday practice of the masses. Amateur artists themselves challenged assumptions of gender and class privilege that had previously been coded into the figure of the (urban male) artist, facilitating broad participation in the fine arts that destabilised the cultural precepts that had previously defined the figure of the artist. By cultivating creativity through broad public exposure to art instruction, cultural officials and amateur artists elevated the countryside as a source of experiential authority and weakened the art academy's position as a legitimising site of training. Excluding amateur art practice from the purview of the contemporary reverses the attempt to locate the fine arts within the social relations of the labouring masses, instead consolidating the primacy of market relations over contemporary art practice. ■

[1] In this essay, following the arguments of scholars including Joshua Eisenman, Paul Robbins, and Andreis Plakans, I prefer the term 'rural resident' or 'farmer' to 'peasant.' However I do use the term 'peasant' to reflect how 农民 was translated into English by the artists and state-employed translators of primary source materials on amateur art practice.



Still from *Lenin in 1918*.

Aesthetics of Socialist Internationalism

Lenin Films in the People's
Republic of China

Tina Mai CHEN

While Soviet fiction and documentary films featuring Vladimir Lenin circulated in the People's Republic China throughout the Maoist period, the meaning of Lenin as revolutionary symbol was not fixed. This essay examines the changing meaning of Lenin films before and after the Sino-Soviet split as a means to historicise the post-socialist afterlives of this particular movie genre. This allows us to see the historic specificity and contingency of aesthetic frames conjoining legitimating ideology and political potentiality.

In the twenty-first century, Lenin's image in cinema exists as floating textual references to a Maoist collective memory that is sutured to a post-revolutionary existence governed by the Chinese Communist Party. Scholars including Geremie Barmé (2009), Guobin Yang (2003), Ming-bao Yue (2005), and others have identified the ways in which appropriation of revolutionary culture for a nostalgia industry forecloses revolutionary political imagination. Yet, if we move back in time to consider how and why Lenin films assumed a central role in Chinese Communist Party's aesthetic legitimization, we also return

to debates over socialist theory and praxis, and the paradox of working toward liberation of ‘all slaves of the world’ and unquestioning loyalty to communist parties. The move to historicise filmic scenes that are currently enshrouded in nostalgia allows us to see the historic specificity and contingency of aesthetic frames conjoining legitimating ideology and political potentiality.

Situating Lenin Films

In 1951, in commemoration of the 27th anniversary of the death of Vladimir Lenin, the China-Soviet Friendship Society in Beijing offered a lecture by a Soviet education specialist followed by a screening of the 1937 film *Lenin in October* (People’s Daily 1951). Over 20 years later, in recognition of the 56th anniversary of ‘the great socialist October Revolution’, the same committee once again screened *Lenin in October*, this time alongside a Chinese news documentary entitled *Today’s China* (Xinhua 1973). The 22 years separating these screenings saw numerous other public presentations throughout China of this well-known film, as well as other Lenin films including *Lenin in 1918* (1939), *Lenin in Poland* (1966), and *Vladimir Ilyich Lenin* (1949). Despite the continuous presence of specific Soviet films in China from the 1950s to the 1970s, Sino-Soviet cooperation in the political, economic, technological, and cultural realms peaked in 1954–55. This was then followed by a prolonged period of decline. Within this changing context, the very meaning and geography of the international proletarian revolution was at stake.

In the Chinese case, Lenin became part of two legitimating triumvirates: the ideological grouping of Marx, Lenin, and Mao Zedong, and the grouping of revolutionary state leaders composed of Lenin, Stalin, and Mao Zedong. The meaning of Lenin as revolutionary symbol was not fixed in either formulation. One constant feature existed, however: the authority of Mao Zedong as revolutionary theorist as well as state leader depended upon successful

mobilisation of Lenin symbolism to support varied contemporary political, ideological, social, and aesthetic programmes. The importance of such transnational revolutionary iconography in the Chinese revolution arose out of a dialectical conceptualisation of revolutionary and national identity in China. To extend Emma Widdis’ (2003) insights into the forging of Soviet space and Sovietness through film, we can understand Lenin films as establishing an aesthetic relationship between Soviet and Chinese people and state, and the physical worlds they inhabited.

Soviet film captured the staging and effect of monumental mass spectacles of the late 1920s in the Soviet Union, and thereby made it available for export. With respect to the mass spectacle staged in Leningrad in 1927, *Ten Years*, Katerina Clark (1995, 247–48) observes:

In the new mass spectacle, it is Lenin who makes the Revolution – or the Revolution *is* Lenin. ... Lenin is not a mere historical actor, but of a totally different order of humanity than that of ordinary citizens. Consequently, it is really only Lenin who can go back into history (or forward). He is both extrahistorical and a maker of history, and so he represents something like the Aristotelian category of the God.

As film and other cultural representations of Lenin in the October Revolution depicted him in command of space and time, this both grounded Lenin in a particular historical moment and loosened him from the moment.

The framing of *Lenin in 1918* and *Lenin in October* as aesthetic consolidation of Lenin, Stalin, and Mao as revolutionary state leaders was most pronounced from 1950 through 1954. A 1952 article in the *People’s Daily* entitled ‘Epics of Socialist Revolution and Construction’ commenced by referring to the 82nd anniversary of Lenin’s birth and the screening of the films *Lenin in October*, *Lenin in 1918*, and *The Vow* (1946, dubbed and imported in China in 1950) (Tang 1952). Tang Jie, the author of the article, affirmed in the second sentence that the power

of these films came from the strong influence of the exalted leadership of Lenin and Stalin in bringing about socialist revolution. Tang provided a lengthy description of the scenes in *The Vow* surrounding the death of Lenin, including melodramatic reminders that Lenin cannot die because he lives within our hearts. The direct beneficiary of the immortal spirit of Lenin in this tale of revolutionary succession was, of course, Stalin.

Yet we must also consider that scenes such as Stalin's oath to Lenin in the Red Square resonated with Chinese viewers because they were intimately familiar with a similar staged scene of immense importance to the Chinese nation: Mao Zedong's proclamation of the founding of the People's Republic of China on 1 October 1949. These two scenes appeared in China as both synchronic historical moments, experienced and consumed at the same time, and as moments with chronological order.

As a way of seeing and understanding the world, the didactic discourse around Lenin films participated in producing a global dialectic with attendant multiple synchronic and diachronic spatio-temporal linkages. Mao's global vision of continuous revolution as well as his own legitimacy as a socialist ruler depended upon mutual recognition with Stalin of the intertwined struggles of the Soviet Union and China. Within this context, the cults of Stalin and Lenin functioned in China in the early 1950s as recognition of the international context of China's past, present, and future. Debates aside over whether or not (and to what extent) Mao considered himself the successor to Stalin for leadership in the unfolding history of socialism, the active cultivation of Soviet cults of personality in China produced an experience of China as global historical actor whose fate was an inherent part of Lenin's October Revolution and Stalin's consolidation of a socialist state in the Soviet Union. It was in this context that Soviet films about Lenin and Stalin were viewed, debated, and disseminated in the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the early 1950s.

Lenin after Stalin

The death of Stalin provided an opportunity for—and eventually necessitated—a gradual disengagement of Lenin from Stalin in the state-authored conceptualisations of Soviet film and Sino-Soviet relations more broadly. As early as January 1953, Lenin occasionally stood alone, or at least more loosely connected to Stalin. This alternative framing of the relevance of films such as *Lenin in October* and *Lenin in 1918* to the Chinese context appeared most markedly in instances where screenings of these films were associated with discussions of the international framework of revolution. One article that appeared in the *People's Daily* in 1953 marked the 29th anniversary of Lenin's death by covering commemorative activities in Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) (Xinhua 1953). The first half of the article was characteristic of the conflation of Lenin and Stalin, as it utilised a hyphenated Lenin-Stalin phrasing on a couple of occasions. Contrary to the format of most articles on Lenin and Lenin films during the early 1950s that moved through a predictable line of leaders from Lenin, to Lenin-Stalin, to Stalin, to Mao Zedong, however, the conclusion of this article moved away from a Lenin-Stalin coupling. The final few paragraphs included short descriptions of events in Romania, the GDR, and Czechoslovakia but no mention was made of Stalin. The article concluded simply by remarking that in Czechoslovakia screenings of *Lenin in October* and *Lenin in 1918*, as well as other Soviet films, took place. Similar forms of reporting on international commemoration of Lenin appeared one year later. In coverage of events in Moscow, Leningrad, Korea, Poland, Bulgaria, Hungary, Albania, and the GDR, the only use of 'Lenin-Stalin' occurred in reference to Korea (Xinhua 1954).

The shift here was subtle but significant. The disarticulation of Lenin-Stalin at the end of the articles suggested that Stalin was not the champion of socialist internationalism

in all instances. The alternative framing of Lenin films offered thus provided space for contesting Stalinist and/or Soviet anti-imperialism by suggesting Mao and China as legitimate successors to the October Revolution. The deterioration of Sino-Soviet relations during the period of Khrushchev's rule in the USSR following the death of Stalin in 1953 was an important moment of contestation over revolutionary meaning, authority, and identity. In these confrontations, Lenin films played a central role. These films continued to be screened on a regular basis but were now framed differently. This entailed placing a greater emphasis on Lenin over Stalin so as to forge a popular revolutionary understanding based on connections between the thought of Lenin and the thought of Mao Zedong, and to assert the authenticity of Chinese rather than Soviet-authored anti-imperialism and socialist internationalism.

Newspaper articles and broadly-circulated propaganda materials of the period endorsed particular Maoist initiatives by linking them to the person and thought of Lenin. For example, discussions of the desirability of friendly competition between organisational units highlighted Lenin's writings on the subject (Liu 1954). This privileging of the writings of Lenin worked to remove Stalin from an ideological lineage tying Lenin to Mao Zedong through promotion of revolutionary enthusiasm and populist forces. The promotion of Leninist ideology, thus had a new use in China—to challenge rather than shore up the cult of Stalin and to position Mao as primary contemporary agent for the unfolding of international proletarian revolution.

The move to disentangle Lenin from Stalin took place in an understated yet effective manner, emphasising revolutionary theory over state leadership. The relatively brief but front-page 1956 commemoration of 86th anniversary of Lenin's birthday in the *People's Daily* remained noticeably silent on any connection between Lenin and Stalin. It also lacked praise for Lenin as a great individual. Instead, the text referred to Leninism (列宁思想), singling out a speech

delivered at the China-Soviet Friendship Society (CSFS). The speech credited Leninism with providing leadership for international events, national economic development, and Party leadership. Following this talk, audience members watched *Lenin in October*. The second and final paragraph of the article reported that CSFS also hosted a photograph exhibition and that the first volume of Lenin's collected works as well as collection of other writings by Lenin had recently been published in Beijing. To commemorate Lenin now meant to become versed in Lenin's Thought. This created a new context in which Lenin films circulated and in which Chinese audiences viewed and understood the films.

Unlike in the Soviet Union, in China the dismantling of the Lenin-Stalin coupling did not entail the literal erasure of Stalin from the revolutionary picture. The PRC did not pick up the de-Stalinised version of *Lenin in 1918* that blocked out Stalin in his first scene with Lenin. Rather, the PRC continued to screen Stalinist-era films, many of which were banned in the Soviet Union under Khrushchev, with a marked preference for early Stalinist films that championed utopian views of socialism. According to various reports and exchanges filed with Sovexportfilm in the late 1950s, the most popular Soviet films at this time were war films, adventure films, and comedies as well as those featuring the revolutionary movement and revolutionary figures. In Heilongjiang province, of the 2,011 screenings of Soviet films to an audience of 1,048,731, the best films from the perspective of the audience were *Tales about Lenin* (1957) and the animated film *Snow Queen* (1957).

Lenin Films in China in the 1960s

Alongside other anti-colonial movements, the May Fourth movement in China viewed the October Revolution as the emancipatory beginnings of a radical reconfiguration of

the world. This reconfiguration was, as Gyan Prakash (1996, 196–97) noted, ultimately utopian as it took colonial domination as the basis for postcolonial transformation. As it developed, the anti-colonial imaginary did not always map onto Soviet cartography. Soviet actions in 1956 in Eastern Europe facilitated the production of a new revolutionary geography. The large-scale use of force in Hungary meant that Asian countries publicly drew parallels between the English-French-Israeli aggression in Egypt and Soviet troops in Hungary (Kramer 1998, 212). The framing of anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism as antithetical to Khrushchev's Soviet Union, allowed China to loosen Lenin and socialist revolution from its Soviet roots by championing the praxis of socialist internationalism and class struggle. Films about Lenin circulating in the PRC became part of re-centering socialist revolution around China by displacing Khrushchev.

In 1960, General Secretary of the Shanghai branch of CSFS Bai Yan believed that the most popular of the ten Soviet films shown on the occasion of the 43rd anniversary of the October Revolution were Lenin films (State Archives of the Russian Federation). By the end of the decade, and during the period of the Cultural Revolution in China, Lenin films appeared as the sole survivors of the political purging of the film repertoire. In Beijing in 1965 there were more than 6,000 screenings of Soviet films, but in 1966 Soviet films were exhibited only 300 times. Strikingly, only six Soviet films were available for shows in Beijing at this time. These films were: *Lenin in October*, *Lenin in 1918* and other unnamed 'old films' (Russian State Archives of Literature and Arts). The films sent to China in 1968 included more Lenin films, namely the fiction film *A Mother's Devotion* (1967) as well as a 1968 documentary on the Soviet army and a fiction feature about a revolutionary, *Nikolai Bauman* (1967).

The renewed relative popularity of Lenin films meant that by the late 1960s Soviet film in China could largely be equated with Lenin films. At this moment, a cautious reintroduction of the Lenin-Stalin pairing occurred in short

articles reporting screenings of *Lenin in October* and *Lenin in 1918* for various anniversary celebrations. In 1967 and future references, Stalin received credit alongside Lenin for his leadership of the revolutionary movement and anti-imperialist struggle. The praise for Lenin and 'his successor, Stalin', functioned to highlight the primary role played by Lenin in the revolutionary struggle (Xinhua 1967). The naming of Stalin as successor in this instance rendered him secondary to Lenin, rather than a larger than life living embodiment of Lenin as was the case in the early 1950s.

A 1967 article in the *People's Daily* directly addressed the importance of the relative positioning of Lenin and Stalin, and the conceptualisation of Lenin in popular representations (Fan 1967). In a critique of Soviet revisionism as applied to Lenin, the article rehearsed debates about Lenin's status as exalted leader versus his human characteristics. The primary purpose of the article was not to engage in a dialogue on cult of personalities. Official Chinese commentary on that issue belonged to a past—and future—moment; at this moment, the cult of Mao circulated widely. Instead, the article emphasised the important contributions of Leninism, arguing that Leninist revolutionary theory lived within the Soviet people and the world's revolutionary people. The final sentence harnessed 'the glory of Leninism' (列宁主义的光芒) to the 'bright sun' (毛泽东思想的太阳) of Maoism. By conflating Lenin, the historical figure representative of the October Revolution, with Leninism as revolutionary theory, an alternative geography of revolution could emerge. No longer was this revolution a fanning out from a Soviet centre; rather revolutionary movements inspired by the October Revolution became part of the Chinese vision with Maoism the contemporary instantiation of revolution and champion of anti-imperialist culture and praxis.

Screenings in 1967 of *Lenin in Poland*, and the discussion of these screenings in the press, reinforced the role Lenin films played in drawing a new revolutionary map. In this

instance, *Lenin in Poland* received praise for being a prime example of realism that enabled the masses to fully appreciate the spirit and life of Lenin. The linking of the Soviet Union, Poland, and China through Lenin films reminded audience members of the common anti-imperialist struggle and its success in Eastern Europe. At this historical moment, the anti-imperialist struggle was the primary lens of analysis through which Lenin and the Soviet Union were to have meaning for the Chinese public.

This preoccupation with anti-imperialist struggle and its relationship to Lenin films constituted the central refrain in the first lengthy article since the early 1950s on Lenin films published in the *People's Daily* in November 1969. The article commenced with reference to Lenin films demonstrating the great influence and meaning of Lenin and Stalin's proletarian struggle. It then quickly moved in characteristic fashion to establish the links between Marxism-Leninism and anti-imperialist struggle, with a concerted emphasis on the worldwide dimension of the struggle. The article explicitly stated that the October Revolution was the beginning of this struggle and that 'we' cannot allow the flag of revolutionary struggle to fall. Only under the leadership of Marxism, Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought could worldwide victory be achieved. This marked the strongest articulation of Lenin films in terms of the revolutionary ideological triumvirate as a replacement of the triumvirate of state leadership that shaped interpretations of Lenin films in the early 1950s.

films became part of the collective memory of the PRC, we can see how these films, like Qu Qiubai's rendition of 'The Internationale', exist within a paradox of expressing belief in socialist internationalism and liberation of 'all slaves of the world' and performing loyalty to the authority of ruling leaders and party-states (Chen 2016).

In the current moment, excerpts from Lenin films appear on Chinese screens, as nods to Mao-era collective memory. Whether in films such as *Seal of Love* (2010) or *In the Heat of the Sun* (1994), or CCTV television series including *The Sun Rises from the East* (2001), these excerpts once again seek to forge lineages of legitimacy. However, Lenin now appears not as a theorist of socialist internationalism, but sutured to aesthetics of Chinese nationalism. The national 'revitalisation' of contemporary China may benefit from a Leninist political structure, but it rests upon a geopolitical landscape of patriotic flags and allegiance to the Chinese state that eschews internationalism as a political project. The Mao era positive reception of Lenin's fierce opposition to 'Great-Russian chauvinism'—and its localisation into an opposition to 'Han chauvinism'—has no place in contemporary China's global political imaginary. The political potentiality of socialist internationalism debated through Lenin films in the 1950s and 1960s China has been replaced in the twenty-first century by excerpts that flicker in the background of China's past as a depoliticised haunting aesthetic of nostalgia that reinforces Party legitimacy and state nationalism. ■

Flickers of the Past

It is through this lens of the primacy of anti-imperialist struggle as both revolutionary goal and critique of the Soviet Union that by the late 1960s Lenin films functioned in China. The films thereby were used to support the Cult of Mao rather than the Cult of Stalin. By outlining the layered ways in which Lenin



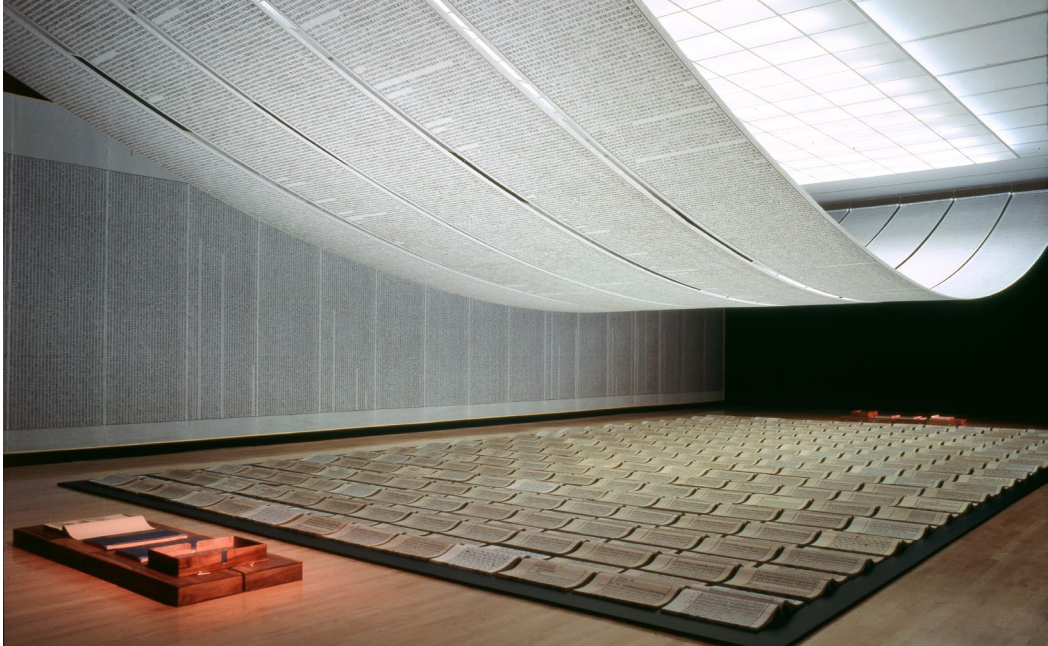
How Does the Phoenix Achieve Nirvana?

Xu Bing, *Phoenix* (archive), 2008-10. Mixed media installation / construction debris and materials. PC: ©Xu Bing Studio.

WANG Hui

Xu Bing's first large-scale installation after getting back to China in the late 2000s was a giant phoenix composed of the detritus of capitalism: construction waste and discarded tools left behind by labourers. Originally to be placed in the lobby of the Beijing Financial Centre, investors balked at the idea of such an anti-capitalist monument at the heart of global capitalism. This essay investigates Xu Bing's formal innovation and gesture of refusal in a world in which the symbols of revolution and political art have become fashionable and lucrative commodities.

In the spring of 2007, at the first meeting of the Asian Council at the Guggenheim, while introducing his works Chinese artist Xu Bing mentioned Joseph Beuys and Mao Zedong. Beuys is an object of emulation for China's '85' [1985] new art movement. When Xu first arrived in the United States and heard a recording of a Beuys lecture, he felt an immediate familiarity. For Xu, Beuys's artistic experiments break the barriers between art and life, aesthetics and politics—and, for him, this is a smaller-scale version of Mao Zedong's theory on the practice of art and politics. In the artist's own words, 'I tell [Westerners] their most important teacher is Beuys and my most



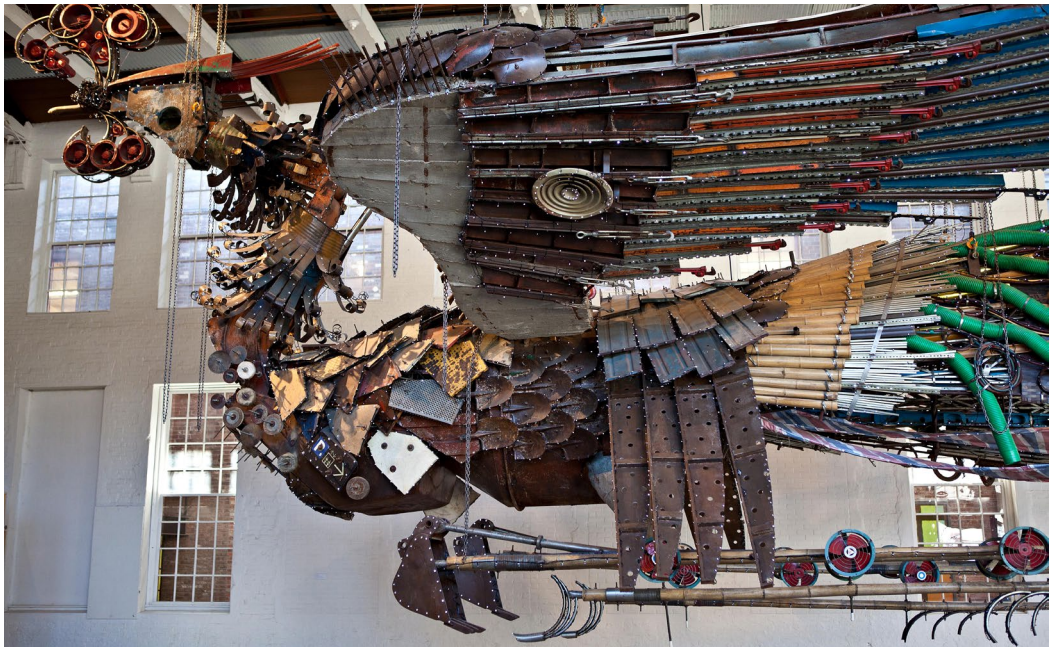
important teacher is Mao Tse Tung . . . Mao is actually a big contemporary avant-garde artist' (Pearlman 2007).

At the centre of Xu Bing's most famous works, such as *Book from the Sky* (1987–91), is the *materiality of language* and experiments in the relationship between signifier and signified. His use of the form of Chinese characters, and invented characters, has helped break down the national limitations of language and writing. In other works—such as *Background Story* (initiated in 2004) and *Phoenix* (since 2008)—he likewise foregrounds materiality to break down barriers. Both of these installations use trash as their artistic material; in *Background Story*, he arranges junk behind a screen to resemble a Chinese painting when backlit. A Chinese painting and junk: which is the signifier, which is the signified? Here Xu Bing plays on the tensions and porous borders between realism and abstraction, form and object.

Throughout all of his projects, he practices a politics of equality: his art does not represent or address any particular group. Object and spirit,

Xu Bing, *Book From the Sky*, 1987–91. Mixed media installation / hand-printed books and scrolls printed from blocks inscribed with 'false' Chinese characters. Installation view at Crossings / Traversées, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 1998. PC: ©Xu Bing Studio

concrete and abstract, the discarded and the cherished, Xu treats all of these dichotomies as barriers to be overcome. That he pays close attention to materiality is natural given to his sensitivity to signification. I suggest that this cultural materialism can only be understood if we place it within Xu Bing's explorations of the semiotic politics of reproduction. We must also understand Xu's work within a kind of non-teleological dialectics. The dialectical character of his works is easy to see, but their non-teleological nature is a topic that comes up in examining the politics of his work.



Xu Bing, *Phoenix*, 2008-10. Mixed media installation / construction debris and materials. Installation view at Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA), North Adams, 2012. PC: ©Xu Bing Studio.

Reconnecting Art and Everyday Life

After he returned to China in 2008, Xu Bing created the massive sculpture named *Phoenix*. The work is composed of junk material and discarded work tools, enacting a return to the site of its assembly by workers. Originally it was to be a red-crowned crane, but the idea was rejected by the investors. There is a message here. When I saw the work while it was being produced, I thought of the 1934 incident of Rivera's fresco *Man at the Crossroads* at Rockefeller Center, which was scraped off at the behest of Nelson Rockefeller for including a portrait of Lenin. One can compare Rivera's homage to communist ideals to Xu Bing's use of the detritus of capitalism and labour to create a piece to be displayed at a centre of global capitalism. Although Xu Bing's work is more metaphorical, in neither piece can the form conceal its subversive anti-capitalist character. Was the project initially rejected because of the dissonance between the beautiful form of the phoenix and the material of construction waste? Or because the space of the financial centre cannot accommodate its own excess material? From the perspective of art and politics, this piece embodies Xu's stance towards inequality in contemporary China and the world, and achieves a unique materialism and formalism within the artist's corpus of egalitarian artwork.

Phoenix is a continuation of twentieth-century art, but also speaks to a new set of conditions. Under the polarised structure and shadow of the Cold War, the 1960s were an era in which politics entered directly into art, such as in Rivera's murals of Lenin, Trotsky, and Mao, or in Beuys's collection of trash leftover after a mass meeting. These works contain a certain irony toward revolution, whereas the revolution promised a different world from the one represented in the artworks, enabling a negative dialectics in which the individual self could come into view. This period also gave birth to a new political relationship

between art and life, allowing art to directly participate in politics, but also giving import to new political movements. The politics of form and physicality are exposed in the process. In line with this tradition, *Phoenix* calls for a political connection between art and everyday life, dismantling the barriers that separate the two. Although Xu Bing's work has gradually transcended the politics and frame of reference of Beuys and 1960s art, we must therefore use the latter to understand the expression and implications of the work of the Chinese artist.

However, Xu Bing's work takes place in a post-Cold War era in which global capitalism dominates the world. Revolution, except for its appropriation by the market, can no longer directly sustain the politics of the artwork, having become just a brand of 'political pop'. The politics of contemporary revolutionary works is one of 'depoliticisation' (去政治化, literally 'expelling politics'), and fulfils the logic of accumulation of the international art market. As revolution has become branded, the bitter history of the spread of capitalism has been transformed into a comedy. This process announces the impossibility of all revolution or any challenge to capitalism. Xu Bing's art not only rejects all art that takes revolution as a brand, it also resourcefully and tenaciously seeks out a new politics for art. In contrast to political pop and its saturation of the market, his art is markedly nonviolent and apolitical. He focuses on probing form and language, going deeply into the complexity of processes of reproduction, working with great care and precision, as in the meticulously considered and wrought coarseness of his *Phoenix*: gloves, hardhats, shovels, work clothes, buckets, pliers ... these tools of labour carry the scars of work, and congeal the time of labour. The value of the commodity is produced in labour time, but labour time can also be evidenced in discarded trash, and the workmanship imprinted in junk. Marxist political economics discovered that abstract labour determines the value of the commodity expressed through labour time. But Xu Bing's use of discarded junk raises the question of what, exactly, is produced by

labour. Production should not be examined only from the standpoint of labour but also in how it relates to capitalist temporalities of unlimited growth, planned obsolescence, and its material form in waste.

Amid the Ruins of Labour

As a product of ruins and modern construction, *Phoenix* is material junk. Ruins appear continuously in the history of art; from the Romantic School to modernism, we can trace the shifting meaning of ruins and junk, but why should junk become so particularly emblematic in our era? Jia Zhangke's 2006 movie *Still Life* exhibits a different kind of ruins, i.e. the remainders of a past world. In the words of poet Xi Chuan, Jia Zhangke's ruins are discarded villages, but the disappearance of the village also manifests a vital attitude toward the future, making his film neither a tragedy nor a celebration, but rather a chaotic mix of emotions (Li et al. 2007, 7–8). The ruins of the *Phoenix* have nothing to do with a previous world, as they are not a leftover from the past. Their material is a product of contemporary building projects, connected to the labour of a new generation of workers, and thus the flipside of the financial centre itself. *Phoenix* uses the excess of production, the discarded part of labour as its material and original design, employing both form and image to produce a richly suggestive piece. With this installation, Xu Bing is attempting to represent an era by archiving the materiality of it.

This motive is closely connected with his reconsideration of artistic tradition, leading to an intriguing exploration of form. Like his earlier work, *Phoenix* explores the connection between real and artifice; the phoenixes directly touch on the real because they employ the detritus of construction, remnants of labour, and surplus of capital. Through these objects, you can viscerally understand the situation of

China in the early twenty-first century. But amidst this realism, Xu Bing also seeks another image related to traditional art, returning to the barrier between life and art that we encountered above. While Beuys produced a political intervention by breaching the barrier, Xu Bing moves in a counter direction through the reestablishment of form which parodies art's self-commodification. Just like how politics, revolt, and revolution—regardless of political view—can be transformed into brands in order to increase the price of art, the overcoming of barriers between life and art, or art and politics, has become commonplace in the art market. Under these conditions, Xu has restored a sense of form that preserves the distance between art and life, as a commentary and revelation of the state of contemporary life. In a world where labour has been fundamentally de-subjectified (去主体化), the subjectivity of art can reform the depoliticisation of the life world. Therefore, the reconstruction of a barrier between life and art has transformed into the reentry of art into life.

As implied above, Xu Bing's work captures contemporary politics in a world where the political is everywhere expelled. In such an era, where art treats politics as decoration, so-called political art is even more commoditised than the pure commodity; politics is diluted into questions of rights; and, the line between politics and performance is blurred; all of which suggest the impossibility of politics and the superfluity of politics. Xu Bing's art is sharply ironic: like Michelangelo who painted religious scenes but infused them with the human world, Xu uses the symbol of the contemporary capitalist world, the financial centre, as a decoration for his artistic installation. However, through preserving the texture and meaning of large-scale junk and making the discarded junk of the financial centre part of the phoenixes' bodies, Xu has created a scene that is self-deconstructing. The meaning of the junk material is at least twofold: on the one hand, it is the excretion of the shining world of capital and modern



Joseph Beuys, Ute Klopheus. PC: ©zeroonefilm / Ernst von Siemens Kunststiftun, Stiftung Museum Schloss Moylan.

architecture, thus showing how capitalism uses material and creates waste in producing its 'bright world'. This is the logic of capital. Another aspect is the opposite of capital, i.e. labour. Most of the details of the piece gesture to labour and the leftovers of work. This piece thus produces an ironic statement about the relationship between capital and labour under contemporary conditions. All of the details in *Phoenix* are related to labour. The material of the phoenixes is not only construction junk but creates a different material derived from the combination of the tools, products, and traces of labour. Likewise, it is a product of labour-value. The financial centre and the construction junk stand apposite, complementing each other, but also in contrast to one another. Within this double abandonment, Xu Bing creates a nirvana (涅槃), where, as he put it in conversation, the

phoenixes are cruel and vigorous but at night become gentle and beautiful, thus showing the slyness/cunning/slipperiness of capital, and the value of labour.

However, the labour that is preserved in *Phoenix* is far removed from the tumultuous excitement of revolution. Although Xu Bing felt a familiarity toward Beuys, as well as Mao Zedong's theory of art, his motives are not as directly political as that of the former and, unlike the latter, does not seek to inspire large-scale mass action, or the idolisation of labour. Rather, it is best to think of Xu Bing as taking the 'taciturn character' of contemporary labour and infusing it with an enriching texture. The financial centre is a symbol of financial capitalism. This differs from industrial capitalism: on the face of it, financial capitalism is just the movement of numbers,

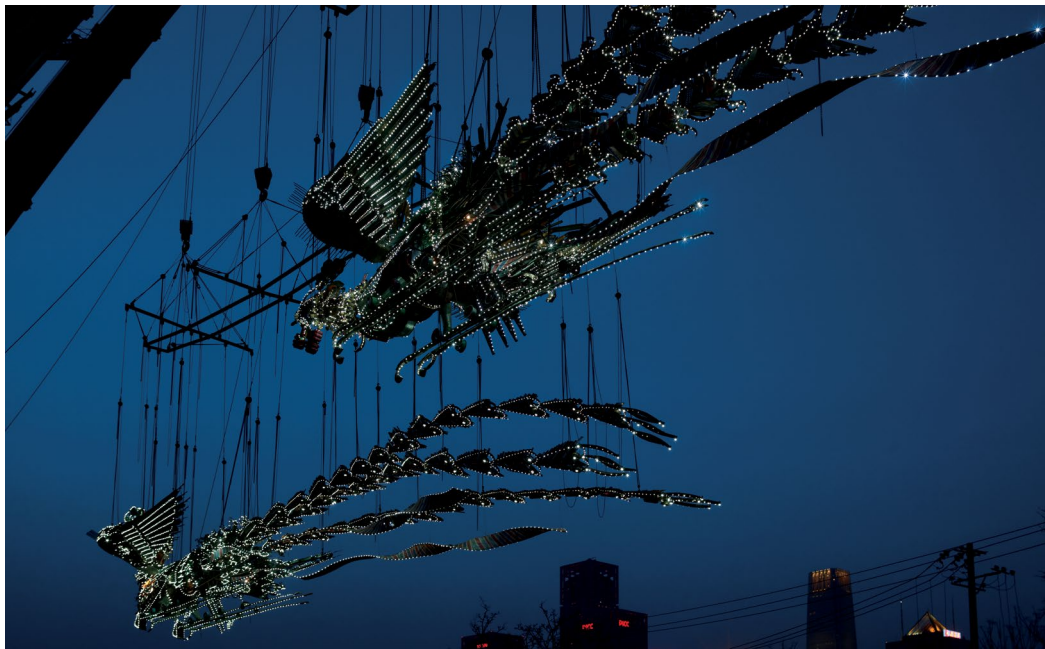
and has no connection to labour. But, as in the past, the areas where money flows also produce connections between capital and labour, only in this central node of finance capital, the connection between labour and capital is even more 'flexible' than under industrial capitalism, to the point that finance can seemingly create accumulation without passing through labour.

The labourers have paid their price for this high-level abstraction of production. At the same time as Xu Bing created *Phoenix*, the Chinese sphere of labour was further approaching a fatally taciturn form of resistance: the suicides of the workers in the factories of the Taiwanese-owned Foxconn in southern China. With no connection to revolution, without even going on strike, 13 workers, one after another, jumped to their deaths at the factory, ending work by ending their lives. We cannot discern which electric devices are a product of these dead workers' labour, but these devices are just as handy as other commodities. It goes without saying that this form of struggle is of an entirely different type from the large-scale mass movements of the twentieth century, particularly the 1960s. The abstraction of labour has fundamentally transformed people into living machines, and the cruelty of the process of production has reached an unprecedentedly refined level. Compared with the history of the labour movements of the twentieth century, what we see today can be understood as the voluntary resistance of labour under the conditions of depoliticisation. This is also a form of politics under the conditions of its absence and, in the retreating tide of political labour movements, what is left is a more individual form of political struggle. We can link this historical transformation with Xu Bing's works to explain the place and meaning of labour in today's world. Within *Phoenix* is preserved the body temperature of labour, but at the same time through this temperature we see the place of labour and its condition in today's world.

Eerie Silences and Enchanting Lights

The phoenixes are silent, and at night they give off an enchanting light. This causes us to reflexively ask of contemporary art: why have some of the deformed symbols of revolution or portraits of revolutionary leaders become logos of international finance? On a larger level, it is because the politicisation of labour is impossible; labour has historically been degraded into a silent and abstract existence. Following the process of globalisation, labour and capital have often been spatially separated, with the result that the politics produced by the proximate confrontation between two has been fundamentally lost. Why have the symbols of revolution and unity between different political views also become a form of commodified exchange? The subjectivity of resistance has disappeared, and all that remains are some substitutes of the politics of times past. Today political struggle and the social terrain have experienced change in a way that raises the question: by what means can we enter into this new politics? Xu Bing has given us the answer of how art can penetrate these new politics. The extraordinarily deep irony of *Phoenix* has political significance. I think the installation contains both a dialogue with the more traditional politics of the twentieth century, but also vitality within the entirely different conditions of today.

From early on, Xu Bing has explored the question of relations between East and West. Through exploring the relationships between reality and artifice, form and spirit, concreteness and abstraction in the history of art, he has broadened his speculation. His experiments both relate to and surpass twentieth century art. In the twentieth century, literature and art increasingly had to engage in self-dialogue, reconsidering the trajectory of the Self. Unfortunately, for many artists, this sort of dialogue and self-reflection, as well as the attempts to break down barriers, had the



Xu Bing, *Phoenix*, 2008–15. Mixed media installation / construction debris and materials; 27 and 28 meters in length, 8 meters in width. Installation view at Xu Bing Aerial Phoenix Project, Today Art Museum, Beijing, 2010. PC: ©Xu Bing Studio

opposite consequence: instead of breaking down a closed system and reconstructing the political connection between art and politics, these experiments ultimately transformed art into a completely autonomous entity, no longer able to enter into social life. From this point of view, the meaning of Xu Bing's work is that it breaks out of this phenomenon: on the one hand, the phoenixes are fictitious (虚拟) images, but on the other hand, the materials they are constructed out of are realist (写实). Though taking a different route, this achieves a similar result as *Background Story*: the background is discarded junk, the foreground is artwork; it is a reciprocal relationship between signifier and signified.

These relations are dialectical, but they do not refer to a definite objective; it is better to say that their mutual relationship is based

on irony. Here when I raise the question of objective, I am not speaking of the general object of criticism, or exposing the loss of such an objective in the process of depoliticisation. The structure of irony and the development of politics are closely related. Politics develops in the relationship between the Self and foe (敌我), such as in the pairing of capital and labour. However, the tension between capital and labour is at the same time structural, e.g. the increase of value in capital has a complementary relationship with the value of labour production. Without labour—or the working class—capitalism cannot be called capitalism. Only when revolution erupts, does a rift occur in this structural relationship, and transform into political resistance. Today the relationship between capital and labour is deeper and broader than ever before, but the



Xu Bing, *Background Story: Mount Lu*, 2015.
Multimedia installation: natural debris attached to frosted glass panel. Installation view at CHINA 8: Contemporary Art from China in the Rhine and Ruhr, Travelling exhibition, Germany. PC: ©Xu Bing Studio.

oppositional gap between the two only exists on account of the form of the structure. Labour is now silent, and, even if some resistance still exists, it manifests itself in a non-political form. In the atmosphere of today, *Phoenix* offers an opportunity to think politically about the remnants of labour.

In the summer of 2010, Xu Bing's *Phoenix* was exhibited at the Shanghai World Expo. The exhibition hall was not as sumptuous as the financial centre, but rather was an abandoned garage that had been renovated. It is said that among all the magnificent convention halls of the World Expo, only the roof of this abandoned garage was capable of supporting the weight of the phoenixes. During the daytime, the space and the body of the installation both give off an aura of abandonment; only at night, do the mystical lights allow the phoenix to take flight in this place of labour. Not far off is the Lupu

bridge, arching over the Huangpu river, even more resplendent than any of the exhibition halls at the World Expo. This is a related message of border-crossing. It is precisely in focussing on this sort of space that, through his artwork and its attendant challenging controversy, Xu Bing becomes a thinker in the art sphere. ■





Can the Creative Subaltern Speak?

Dafen Village Painters, Van Gogh, and the Politics of 'True Art'

Chinese worker painters from China's Van Goghs (2016).

PC: Chinasvangoghs.com.

Paola VOGLI

Migrant workers' artistic aspirations develop within the broader tension between Art as a high-brow, big-money, critically-endorsed global enterprise, and art as the creativity of the everyday. As shown by the case of Dafen village's worker painters, in today's China the creative subaltern has become the focus of celebratory state-promoted narratives and investments and, more critically, transnational media and academic investigations. However, despite this newly-acquired visibility, this kind of creative work remains largely excluded from global art circles, as well as the industry's cash flow and critical appraisals, and continues to be defined by the condition of the artists as localised migrant workers.

In independent documentary filmmaking, migrant workers have been captured through two main, interconnected narratives of oppression and resistance (Florence 2018). The former exposes the unjust, exploitative, degrading, and ultimately destructive condition of those living at the bottom of social and economic hierarchies. The latter recognises their agency, beyond victimisation, identifying the 'weapons of the weak' (Scott 2008), and the multiple strategies through which they do not merely survive, but also fight against, and even manage to break through, the oppressive system that crushes and tries to silence their labour—and human—rights.

Within this dual narrative framework, there has been an increased interest in migrant workers' creative rights in relation to Art as a high-brow, big-money, critically-endorsed global enterprise and art as the creativity of the everyday, both markers of urban modernity and, in the Chinese context, post-socialist cities. In earlier works—such as *Dance with Farmworkers* (和民工跳舞, directed by Wu Wenguang, 1999) or *Whose Utopia?* (谁的乌托邦, directed by Cao Fei, 2006)—the critical tension between the alienation resulting from labouring in mass production and the emancipating power of creative practices is explored via encounters between artists and migrant workers. In these encounters, the migrant workers are shown as active participants in creative projects that are, however, fully designed, developed, and owned by the urban artist. Elizabeth Parke describes the migrants' presence in contemporary Chinese art as a 'public secret', i.e. what Michael Taussig refers to as 'that which is generally known but cannot be articulated' (Parke 2015, 239).

Something quite different takes place in *The Verse of Us* (我的诗篇, directed by Qin Xiaoyu and Wu Feiyue, 2015, internationally released as *Iron Moon*) and *China's Van Goghs* (中国梵高, directed by Yu Haibo and Yu Tianqi Kiki, 2016). Focussing respectively on worker-poets (打工诗人) and worker-painters (画工), these documentaries explore the migrant workers' own artistic creations vis-à-vis endorsement-giving institutions, such as literary circles and art galleries, that assign both cultural and capital value to art.

Both documentaries should be considered as part of translingual (mostly Chinese and English, but also other languages) and transmedia narratives broadly concerned with issues related to subaltern creativity in China. These narratives develop across a multiplicity of channels, e.g., books, literary magazines, news, exhibitions, museums, screenings, performances, photo essays, blogs, and academic research. In the case of *The Verse of Us/Iron Moon*, the narrative focuses more specifically on *dagong* (打工) poetry, also

referred to as 'battlers' poetry, an Australian colloquialism that conveys the connotations of 'working-for-the-boss' and 'underdog' implied in *dagong* (van Crevel 2017, 247; see also Sorace's essay in the present issue). The documentary's audiovisual story continues offscreen in an anthology of translated poems published a couple of years after the film's release (Qin and Goodman 2016). The worker-poets presented in the documentary and anthology also participate in local events and publications, intersecting with both grassroots literary movements (such as the Beijing-based Picun Literature Group) and state-sponsored institutions. Academics have also contributed to this narrative: take for example Sun Wanning's pioneering investigation of migrant workers' cultural practices (2012 and 2014), Maghiel van Crevel's research on migrant worker poetry in relation to ownership and translatability (2017 and 2019), and Gong Haoming's examination of ecopoetics in the *dagong* poetry (2018).

Similarly concerned with subaltern creativity, another transmedia narrative develops in the context of the contemporary Chinese art scene and has in particular focussed on worker-painters. In this case, the documentary film *China's Van Goghs* follows in the footsteps of Winnie Wong's 2014 book *Van Gogh on Demand: China and the Readymade*; like the book, it takes place in the heart of Shenzhen's Dafen village, home of the world's largest community of copy painters. Framing her analysis in the broader context of global art markets, Wong's book deconstructs clichés and unpacks assumptions about 'mindless imitation' or 'mechanical techniques' instead describing these painters' work as originating 'from the mind', and representing 'freehand' and 'unmechanical forms of painterly skills' (2014, 53). The Dafen painters, Wong contends, 'understand themselves as both *dagong* workers and independent artists' (2014, 56). While Wong's book places its emphasis on the dynamics of production, reproduction, marketing, and exploitation, the documentary takes an intimate perspective on the painters' lives and focuses on their personal aspirations.

Both the documentary and the book cross paths with the exhibitions of photojournalist Yu Haibo, the co-director of *China's Van Goghs* with his daughter, Yu Tianqi Kiki. Yu Haibo's photos and his exchanges with Dafen Village's painters are also included in Wong's book. In addition, this narrative expands to include journalistic reports, such as Wong's interview on the Shanghaiist website (Tan 2018) and *The New York Times*' story 'Own Original Chinese Copies of Real Western Art!' (Bradsher 2005).

The 'worker-painter' narrative as portrayed through the Dafen case branches out in yet another direction, namely a narrative that includes the national and local government's investments in Dafen. Dafen's painters are proudly celebrated and displayed in the local museum, and ideologically appropriated in the newly launched (in 2018) Dafen International Oil Painting Biennale, which, according to its official website, seeks 'the promotion of oil paintings with creativity and individuality' and aims to make 'Dafen [...] a platform for China to understand the world and a window for the world to acknowledge China'. The biennale is '[u]nder the national development goals of "the Belt and Road" initiative and the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area,' and is framed in its familiar China-centred rhetoric:

The cultural brand of Dafen International Oil Painting Biennale, Shenzhen (Dafen Biennale for short) continues to exert its international influence, with Shenzhen, the pioneer city of reform and opening-up, as a foothold, continuously radiating outward, promoting the new trend of cultural industry development with stronger confidence, and setting the standards of artistic creation. (My emphasis)

Albeit with quite different agendas, both the celebratory state-promoted narrative and the more critical transnational narrative seek to recognise, collect, document, and give visibility to Dafen painters. Yet, within these

narratives, their creative works remain largely contextualised within, and entrapped by, their condition of localised migrant workers.

To Be or Not to Be a 'True Artist'?

Despite the plural in its title, *China's Van Goghs* is mostly centred on one painter, Zhao Xiaoyong. As Wong writes, '[a] photogenic and generous man, Zhao has been asked by many foreign journalists, television reporters, artists, and at least one art historian, to appear on camera' (2014, 155). There is no doubt that, compared to his fellow painters, Zhao has had significant media exposure. His studio in Dafen Village still carries visible and tangible evidence of this exposure on its window, covered with posters of the documentary and the photo exhibitions that have taken his story to international audiences.



Zhao Xiaoyong's Studio, Dafen village, Shenzhen, December 2019. PC: Paola Voci.

The documentary focuses on Zhao's journey from Shenzhen to Amsterdam and back, as he seeks recognition for the value of his work, not just financially, but artistically. On the official movie website, his story is described as '[a]n intimate portrait of a peasant-turned-oil painter who is transitioning from making copies of van Gogh's paintings to *creating his own authentic work of art*, emblematic of the journey that China is going through, from "Made in China" to "Created in China"' (my emphasis). Echoing the documentary's promotional summary, media coverage also emphasises the empowering, transformative journey towards becoming a 'true artist'. For instance, on *Al Jazeera's Witness* (2018), an article summarises the documentary as 'Vincent van Gogh's iconic painting and once in a lifetime trip *transform* a Chinese painter into a *true artist*' (my emphasis). Similarly, in the *Hollywood Reporter*, the reviewer refers to '[a] profound portrait of a struggling artist' and notes that '[v]eering sharply away from the stereotype of Chinese laborers as a faceless mass seeking a better quality of life, *China's Van Goghs* explores their desire for spiritual fulfillment, too. [...] the filmmakers show their protagonists as *bona fide* artists, struggling like Van Gogh to find their creative voices and realize their vision beyond their own economic and social circumstances' (Tsui 2017).

The only departure from the image of a struggling artist or peasant-turned-oil painter is found on the Ueberformat Art website (Conscious Art Consulting). The site is run by San Francisco-based Thomas Kohler ('partner, guardian, and cheerleader for creatives') and it describes Zhao as 'a professional painter' rather than a labourer with a dream. Both his connection with the Dafen village and the documentary are mentioned, but they are not the main focus of his biographical notes. While Ueberformat's endorsement suggests that Zhao is a 'true artist', the limited recognition of this small online platform arguably only provides additional virtual exposure rather than a functional channel for him to reach out to global markets.

Do Money and Media Make a 'True' Artist?

Out of these interconnected media stories, Zhao emerges as a hard-working, wilful but still overpowered migrant worker, seeking, but not succeeding, to be accepted as an independent artist. In contrast, on Chinese media, news coverage about another one of 'China's Van Goghs' suggests that such acceptance is possible. Xiong Qinghua is an example of a story with a happy ending, in which the creative subaltern, after years of suffering, is finally rewarded. In local and national news, Xiong is described as a Chinese Picasso who just wants to be himself (Luo 2017). He is depicted as an underestimated 'peasant Van Gogh', initially 'turned down by Shenzhen's Dafen Oil Painting Village', who later managed to gain visibility online and sold 'many paintings' by exhibiting in Beijing's renowned 798 Art District (China Daily 2016).



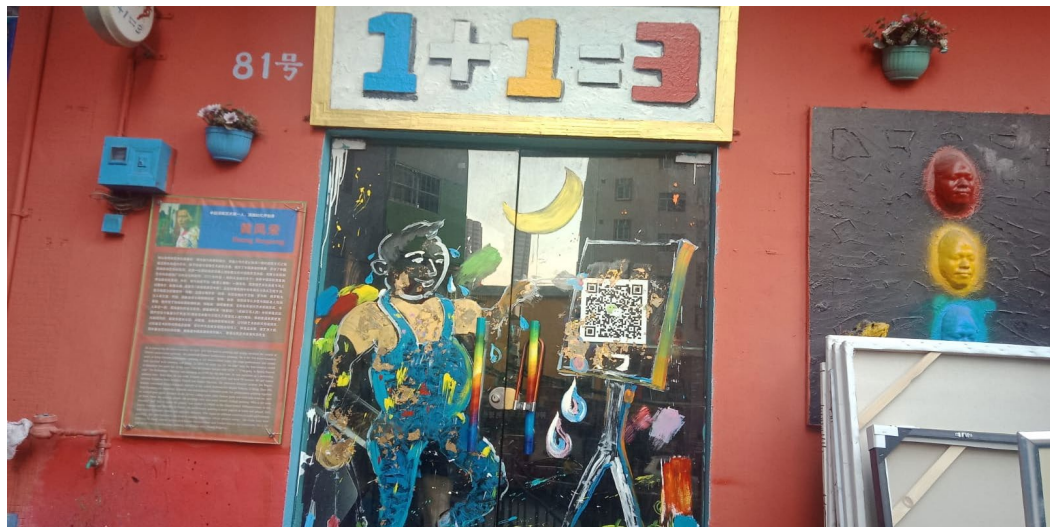
Peasant painter Xiong Qinghua is dubbed China's Pablo Picasso. PC: CGTN (Luo and Li 2017).

Xiong's recognition as an artist is achieved within China, rather than via international approval. One of the unspoken obstacles in achieving such success and recognition may therefore be Zhao's inescapable—in fact, unchosen—association with Western academia and independent filmmaking, which has given him international exposure, but has also framed him within their critique of both China's and global capitalism's inequities, thus possibly making his story less appealing to state-controlled media and/or state-promoted exhibitions.

In fact, despite his international exposure, apart from the posters on his windows, Zhao's studio does not stand apart from those of other fellow painters in Dafen village. Besides the Art Museum, the only other place in Dafen village that catches the visitor's attention is Huang Fengrong's stand-alone colourful building, with a door humorously surmounted by the sign '1+1=3'.

Huang is a performance painter, native of Putian, Fujian province, who has lived in Shenzhen since 2006. As noted in one of his

promotional videos, Huang's goal is 'to convey happiness' and 'to release positive energy in the form of innovative art'. His histrionic personality and eclectic talent have made him a small celebrity on national media, especially since his participation in the 2010 CCTV Spring Festival Gala. Like in Xiong's case, on Chinese media, Huang is presented as mostly a home-grown and home-based talent. Reference to his international reach is always framed as a consequence of the recognition he has first obtained in China. Most recently, he completed a multimedia project involving China's 56 ethnic minorities, which he describes as a journey to experience minority cultures and create works reflecting their attributes. His paintings and the resulting documentary, *Impressions of China 56* (印象中国56, 2017), received, once again, national news coverage (Ye 2019). Huang's online presence also includes his profile on 'Art Express'—the news section of the China-based, Chinese-language website Artron, where his works and events are listed.



Huang Fengrong's stand-alone building in Dafen village, Shenzhen, December 2019. PC: Paola Voci.



In Huang's case, recognition appears to result mostly from mainstream validation channels in popular culture and entertainment. On Huang's YouTube channel, one can find a selection of his painting performances on national television in China, as well as abroad (i.e., his performance at the European Illusion Festival or with Sophie Marceau at the 2016 International Women's Day). While still lacking recognition in the global Art scene, he attracted the interest of several local universities. For instance, he was an artist-in-residence at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in Shenzhen in 2017 and was invited as a guest lecturer at Putian University in Fujian in 2018. Today Huang appears to have made it; his residence in Dafen is a sort of a pied-à-terre; he travels frequently, but when he is there, he is happy to talk with visitors, take photos, and share his latest news.

Making It Globally: Is the 'True' Artist an Educated Urbanite?



With very limited exceptions—such as Xiong Qinghua and Huang Fengrong—in the broader transmedia narrative centred on the worker-painters developed across national and ideological divides, the only prominent *named* protagonists are actually China and Van Gogh. Van Gogh appears like an obvious, attention-catching device for titles in books, films, and news articles. Not only are the copies of his paintings among those in highest demand and enjoying great popularity both in China and abroad, but he has also come to embody the marginalised, unappreciated genius destined to a life of struggle. However, the recurrent deployment of Van Gogh has also become an effective branding that makes the creative subaltern a valuable ideological and commercial asset, while at the same time it denies them a *name*, i.e., the key marker of the 'true artist'. In both domestic and international

Posters advertising Huang's 're-creations' of 100 world-famous paintings. PC: Art Express.

narratives, with the unintentional complicity of academics, filmmakers, and journalists, the recurrent reference to Van Gogh also functions as a problematic branding that stereotypes, anonymises, and indeed discounts the worker-painters' own individual creativity.

Such branding contrasts with how Zeng Fanzhi, one of China's top-selling artists, can in fact appropriate Van Gogh as part of his own creative work (Perlez 2016). As an educated urbanite, Zeng can express his creative agency both through his art and his own voice. In an interview on the occasion of his latest exhibition at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam in 2017–18, Zeng confidently discusses both Van Gogh's aesthetics and legend, as an equal: 'I think our styles are drastically different. We live in different eras and are rooted in different cultures. It is natural for our respective art to take different paths. Van Gogh's inspiration to me is largely spiritual; in practical terms, it should be easy for the audience to identify our differences from our artworks' (Gagosian Quarterly 2018). Rather than being absorbed and defined by his association with Van Gogh or within China's post-socialist dream, Zeng's established status as 'true artist' allows him to be inspired by Van Gogh and be critical of China; most crucially he can be recognised separately and independently from both.

Subaltern Creativity: Exclusion and Oppression in the 'Cool' City

By and large, worker-painters have remained excluded by global art circles, as well as the industry's cash flow and its critical appraisals. Dafen village's domestic and global visibility has generated both touristic appeal and government interest as a business model for urban development, but it has not given the worker-painters their desired recognition as independent artists. While not deprived of individual agency and arguably able to exert control over their own labour, commissions, and creative work, they are denied both 'artistic recognition and cultural citizenship' (Wong 2014, 10).

On the one hand, their collective experience is appropriated in the rhetoric of the China Dream in which 'socialist values are used to champion the creativity of the nonelite' (Wong 2016, 212). Unlike Chinese contemporary artists who are 'setting auction records and exhibiting in art museums all around the world' (Wong 2016, 193), they remain inescapably defined



Zeng Fanzhi, *Van Gogh III*.
PC: Martinique 2019.

by and confined in Dafen—‘a dystopian object of the Chinese copy’ and ‘a utopian subject of universal creativity’ (Wong 2014, 10).

On the other hand, as *migrant* workers, arguably living as permanent outsiders within the city, Dafen painters also face another, possibly even greater, obstacle in their demand for cultural citizenship. Rural migrants have exponentially grown in numbers in the cities, but are still largely marginalised by the educated urbanite middle-class. For *China Van Goghs*’ worker-painters, just as for *Iron Moon*’s worker-poets, and more broadly for the creative subaltern, the measure of their artistic recognition may have in fact less to do with the thorny question of what ‘true art’ is and the complex social power relations that determine its answer in any specific time and place. Rather, their lack of affirmation may be mostly predicated on their exclusion from the city’s cultural space.

A key issue here is ‘the alignment of creativity with the cool, sophisticated and metropolitan’, which means that ‘the value of creativity often remains tethered to its capacity to make profits and conforms to the entrepreneurial imperatives of city managers, reinforcing the strategic role of creative industries in economic development and urban renewal’ (Edensor and Millington 2018). Migrant workers who are and want to be recognised as painters and poets clearly show that ‘creativity proliferates and seethes in everyday life and in quotidian spaces’ and ‘cannot only be associated with entrepreneurs and artists’, and should be recognised as ‘undoubtedly located in settings that are far from urban centres’ (Edensor and Millington 2018). Yet, paradoxically, their artistic recognition depends on their association with entrepreneurs and artists in the heart of urban centres.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s famous question—‘can the subaltern speak?’ (Spivak 1994)—underscores Chinese migrant workers’ creative rights and their failure to be recognised as independent artists. It is important to acknowledge that beyond the specificity of the Chinese nation state, Dafen painters’ exclusion

and oppression is ultimately rooted in class, social, and cultural hierarchies that have only been exacerbated by global capitalism. In this context, state and local government officials, national and international entrepreneurs, as well as filmmakers, journalists, and academics are all speaking for the subaltern, contributing in different ways and with different goals, to giving visibility to the subaltern’s creativity, but also controlling meaning and assigning value. ■



Marina Abramović, *Rest Energy*, 1980.

Risk

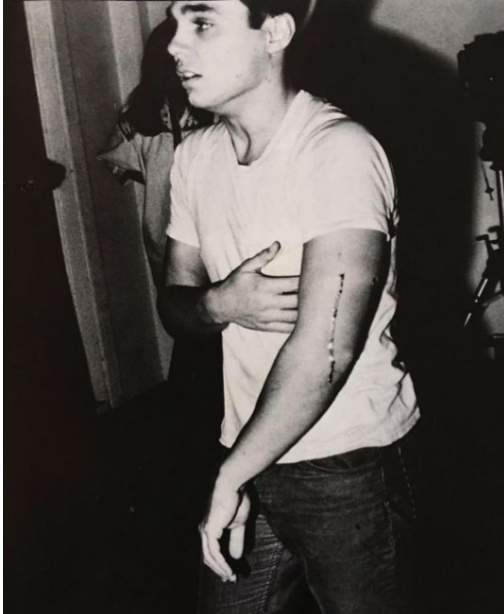
The Hidden Power of Art Creation

CAI Qing

Performance artists have been subjecting their bodies to physical ordeals, risk, and even the possibility of death. In this essay, Cai Qing introduces famous examples of performance art in China and abroad that entailed violence done to the body. Under China's authoritarian model of capitalism, the body is subject to numerous cross-cutting disciplinary forces; to invent something new, the performance artist must jump into the unknown.

Risk calls forth the possibility of danger and challenge in the regime of art. It is an approach that artists draw upon to create new meanings and produce unexpected results in a world that is predictable. By stepping out of convention, the artist knowingly enters, struggles, and perseveres in difficult conditions, either resulting in a previously unimagined achievement or an expenditure that ends in complete failure.

Due to the elements of unpredictability and uncontrollability, risk is capable of keeping the audience in suspense and aroused expectation. For this reason, it is the perfect artistic weapon to arrest the soul's attention. Risk offers different possibilities in art. Various elements can produce risk or achieve similar effects, such as random and contingent encounters and



Chris Burden, *Shoot*, 1971.

occasions. For performance art, risk is always the most interesting part. The indeterminacy of the event produces unexpected results and makes all performance art contingent on the singularity of the moment. Contingency offers art new possibilities, pathways, and unforeseen outcomes.

How Much Can a Body Endure?

In the history of performance art, there are several artists and works whose legacies are profound. In California, American artist Chris Burden (1946–2015) made a name for himself by adopting an extreme method which sent intense reverberations throughout the art world. He performed several dangerous works of art, such as *Shoot* (1971), when he asked an assistant to shoot his left arm with a .22-calibre rifle from a distance of about 16 feet, and *Trans-*

Fixed (1974), when he was crucified on the top of a Volkswagen Beetle with nails hammered into both of his hands.

Yugoslavia-born performance artist Marina Abramović (1946–present) has been described as the ‘grandmother of performance art’. She often puts herself in perilous situations and takes risks in her performances. In *Rest Energy* (1980), she and her then partner Ulay (1943–2020) held an arrow on a taut bow between their bodies aimed directly at her heart for four minutes and ten seconds. In *Lips of Thomas* (1975), she used a razorblade to carve a five-pointed star on her belly, allowing blood to flow from the cuts. Perhaps most controversially, in *Rhythm 0* (1974) she offered 72 objects to the audience to use on her in any manner they desired, while she just stood there motionless. The objects included a rope, knife, prickly rose, bullet, and gun. This performance pushed risk and suspense to its peak. The constant presence of risk in Marina Abramović’s artworks pushes them to the extreme limit of art, and bestows their power and significance, making them unforgettable.

Extreme uses and explorations of the limits of the body have also been used as medium of political expression (Bargu 2018). In a piece titled *Segregation* protesting against the political abuse of psychiatry in Russia, Russian performance artist Petr Pavlensky (1984–present) cut off his right earlobe with a chef’s knife while sitting naked on the enclosure wall of the infamous Serbsky medical centre on 19 October 2014. In *Stitch* (2012), he sewed his mouth shut to protest the silencing of contemporary artists, specifically in response to the incarceration of members of the Russian punk collective Pussy Riot. For his performance *Fixation* (2013), Pavlensky nailed his scrotum to the pavement of the Red Square in front of Lenin’s Mausoleum to embody the ‘apathy, political indifference, and fatalism of Russian society’. In another work from 2013 titled *Carcass*, he rolled his naked body in a multilayered cocoon of barbed wire symbolically placed in front of the Legislative Assembly of Saint Petersburg. Each



[2] Petr Pavlensky.
Segregation, 2014

of his actions ended with arrests. The artist unsparingly subjects his body to pain to protest the status quo in Russia. By using the method of risk, his art conveys a formidable power.

Blood on the Wall

The symbolism of blood, what Gil Andijar calls ‘our political hematology’, evokes and connects the violence of politics and art. Artists not only spill blood in their performances, but also use its red materiality as paint on a canvas or graffiti on a wall. In 1988, Istvan Kantor (1949–present), a performance master from Canada, violently splashed his own blood on the wall next to two Picasso paintings at MoMA—some drops of blood even flecked on the painting *Girl With A Mirror*. Since then, despite countless arrests and appearances in court, he has performed similar artistic performances all around the world. During the Jeff Koons retrospective at the Whitney

Museum in 2016, he conducted a ‘dialogue’ by painting a red X on the wall, signing ‘Monty Cantsin [one of his aliases] was here’ in black marker, and posing for a selfie in front of it.

Each of Kantor’s performances requires courage in the face of risk. He cannot anticipate what will happen, so he needs to prepare himself to confront every possibility. For his MoMA performance he was fined an exorbitant amount of money and only after several years of court battles was the fine reduced to 1,000 US dollars. Another fine for ‘attacking’ the Hamburger Bahnhof Contemporary Art Museum in Berlin was paid off by an art fan. Kantor’s risky actions have elicited several media reports, extensive discussion, and wide-ranging public attention. He became a star of sorts. Despite art museums around the world shutting the door in his face, he was awarded the Canadian Governor General’s Award in Visual and Media Arts.

The blood of artists can also protest the blood spilled by states. In 2012, Kantor created another blood work on Ai Weiwei’s



[3] He Yunchang, *One-metre Democracy*, 2010

solo exhibition in an art museum located in Toronto, in order to pray for Ai's safety (Ai was under surveillance at the time). In 2014, Kantor came to China and dripped his hot blood into two iconic rivers of China—the Yangtze River and Yellow River.

Performance and Prohibition in China

From its inception, this kind of 'extreme' performance art in China has been stigmatised, for the simple reason that Chinese people regard blood as a symbol of violence and nudity as pornographic. Actually, engaging in performance art in China has always been a risky endeavour because the government prohibits this kind of art from taking place. In the last few years, the preconceived stigma around performance art has lessened to a small degree, especially since the news of internationally successful performance artists

has finally reached Chinese audiences. Now performance art has become fashionable. More and more younger people participate in it, but artworks that take genuine risks are still few and far between.

He Yunchang (1968–present) is widely reputed for subjecting his body to risk and self-mutilation, such as surgically removing one of his ribs. In one of his early works in the 1980s, *Explosion* (爆破), he risked his life for his art. The artist detonated explosive devices separated from his body only by fine writing paper used for traditional Chinese painting (宣纸) and a single wall. In *One-metre Democracy* (一米民主, 2010), without anaesthesia and aided by a doctor, he cut a meter-long and 0.5–1-centimetre-deep gash from his collarbone to knee. This work not only put his own body in danger but was also a political risk considering that the message was that Chinese people are not allowed to discuss democracy. To commemorate the events of June Fourth, in 2015 He performed *Snow in June* (六月雪), in which he allowed a group of people to chafe his



[4] Xiao Lu, *Polar*, 2016

skin with sandpaper leaving a mass of abrasions all over his body, as if it were in bloom. He is an artist who is not afraid of pain, or at least is able to endure it.

Another Chinese artist, Yang Zhichao (1963–present) has created similar artworks. In *Iron* (烙, 2000), he had someone use a red-hot iron to brand his personal identification number on his shoulder. He also had grass planted on his back to reveal the porous boundary between bodies, nature, technology, society, and the state. In another work, in which he was assisted by Ai Weiwei, he implanted a secret object in the flesh of his thigh, which will be disclosed sometime in the future. The method of risk and endurance of pain by these Chinese artists is an attempt to use their own suffering to convey the suffering of the nation at this particular moment in history.

When something accidental happens during the process of creation, the artist is able to take advantage of the situation and adapt to the circumstances at hand to improve the artwork. This is also viewed as a kind of risk-taking. Take, for example, the latest work by the Chinese female artist Xiao Lu (1962–present) titled *Polar* (极地, 2016). When she was drilling into an ice wall with a knife, she accidentally cut open her hand. In her own words: ‘When I was changing hands with the knife, I cut myself and when I saw the blood, I wasn’t scared. I was excited. It was beautiful. It was a real experience’ (Murray 2018). As she switched to her other hand, she pressed her wounded palm on the ice wall to reduce the pain. The imprint of her bloody palm surprised her, so she continued to drill for another half hour, as the blood from her wound congealed in



[5] Li Zhanyang, *Wu Song Kills Sister-in-law*, 2014

the ice. Originally a rather banal performance took on a new and deeper meaning from the unanticipated effect of her own blood on the ice. As a result, the performance has achieved a mythical status.

Among successful contemporary Chinese artists, those like Ai Weiwei (1957–present) and Li Zhanyang (1969–present) know how to wield the magical weapon of risk to gain acclaim and influence. Ai Weiwei, a household name recognised around the world, is an example of someone whose experiences, and legends, are composed of a series of risks (Sorace 2014). Sculptor and installation artist Li Zhanyang has also taken risks in his criticisms of the frivolity of Chinese culture and fabrications of history. By using the method of public sculpture, Li Zhanyang reinterpreted the story ‘Wu Song Kills His Sister-in-law’ (武松杀嫂), from the

classical Chinese novel *The Water Margin*, by subverting the popular image of Wu Song as lofty and upright, and a defender of traditional values against his adulterous sister in law Pan Jinlian. Instead, his sculpture depicts Wu Song in an exaggerated pornographic posture with a lewd expression. As a result, this work has stirred ongoing controversy, condemnation, and discussion throughout Chinese society.

Danger, Temptation, and Hope

In conclusion, risk expands art’s vitality and helps exploit the latent potential of artistic creation. It can be said that risk in art provides an opportunity and inclination toward the meeting point of an entirely new situation: a juncture for writing a new page in history. In China, the state could be considered the preeminent performance artist, making both the risks and rewards of artistic practices more exhilarating and dangerous.

Contemporary artists’ pursuit of the new compels them to take risks as frequently as possible (Groys 2014). Even some mature artists engage in risks to transform their old habits and break out of their encirclement in order to produce something new. Risk in art is about constructing an unanticipated future and implementing its power. Risk is danger, but it is also temptation, and even more so, hope. ■

Translated by Christian SORACE.



Towards a Partisan Aesthetics

Zhou Yang, Chernyshevsky,
and 'Life'

Kind Guidance (Chairman
Mao teaching theory in
Yan'an), 1975.
PC: Chinese posters.net

Benjamin KINDLER

This essay seeks to excavate a Maoist politics of 'life' as the grounds for a new, proletarian aesthetics and as a counterpoint to the biologisation of life under authoritarian state formations. It does so through a reading of Mao Zedong's 1942 Yan'an Talks and their demands that intellectuals immerse themselves in the life of the masses via the theoretical role of Zhou Yang. In doing so, it seeks to suggest answers to the question: how might we conceive of a non-fascist life under late capitalism?

The time of crisis in which this article is written has seen the political aesthetics of 'life' return to the forefront of social critique. The enablement of new capacities of state surveillance and intervention, in and beyond China, draws its legitimacy from the real and pressing demand to protect citizens against a serious medical threat. But political language is never innocent. The Chinese press therefore abounds with references to the problem of life as *shengming* (生命), denoting a biologised, existential concept of life, and one that enables slippage between the life

of the individual citizen and the life of the racialised nation-state qua corporate entity. The proliferation of these references points beyond our immediate political context to recall a larger set of political invocations of life in modern Chinese history, including but not limited to the fashioning of the nation as a biological organism amid the Chinese intellectual investments in Social Darwinism at the fin-de-siècle, and the fascist political aesthetics of the corporatist nation caught in a fight for survival during the 1930s.

The return of a political language that is at once both remote and familiar is no coincidence. It marks the historical structure of repetition that links the Chinese neoliberal authoritarian present with a previous historical moment dominated by discourses of national self-strengthening and the consolidation of the nation-state form. Between the present and the cusp of the twentieth century lies a trajectory of revolutionary experiences that are increasingly put under erasure as the discursive condition of the ideological coherence of the contemporary Chinese state. China's hyper-authoritarian quarantine measures provide a further alibi for the defeat of the revolutionary experiments of the twentieth century.

The choice of words does not exhaust the entirety of politics, but words do matter. The experience of Chinese socialism sought to offer an alternative vocabulary of life whose point of departure was not the mythologised nation state or life as biology, but rather life as a problem of social relations, and one that offered the possibility of a transformation in the relations between intellectuals and the masses. This too was an aesthetic conception of life and, more specifically, of life as *shenghuo* (生活) within a larger process of political revolution where writers were called upon to immerse themselves in the conditions of mass life to prepare for the task of producing literature for the masses. The retrieval of this genealogy, then, is important not only as an exercise in revolutionary history, but also as a warning against the statist monopolisation and biologisation of life in the present political

conjuncture. Recovering this genealogy can go some way to answering the contemporary question: what does it mean to live a non-fascist life in times of crisis?

Non-fascist, or Maoist Life

'The life of the people is always a mine of the raw materials for literature and art, materials in their natural form, materials that are crude, but most vital, rich, and fundamental' asserted Mao in his famous Yan'an Talks in 1942. These Talks were to provide the basis for cultural policy for the remainder of the socialist period, and yet their development also encompassed a legacy of theoretical exploration that centres around the problem of 'life', denoted as *shenghuo*, as the origins of literary creation and as the site for the transformation of the intellectual. In actual fact, this term enjoyed wide purchase in the 1940s amidst the intellectual debates of Chinese communism. The problem of life is, for example, also central to Ai Siqu's interventions concerning problems of philosophy. Ai provided much of the inspiration for Mao's own philosophical texts 'On Contradiction' (矛盾论) and 'On Practice' (实践论), and so too did his vernacular writings enjoy wide popularity from the 1930s onwards. In his famous primer *Philosophy for the Masses* (1936), he posits philosophy as immanent within the sphere of everyday life, arguing that 'in our everyday life, it is possible to find traces of philosophy at every place and every time' (Ai 2012, 3). The understanding of life as the stuff of everyday quotidian experience rather than existential biology already underscores the specific valences of the Maoist theorisation of life.

In its aesthetic permutation, however, the introduction of life as a central category of Maoist cultural theory was not the innovation of Ai Siqu or of Mao alone, but owed a great deal to his cultural lieutenant Zhou Yang, who has otherwise received recognition only for his complex role as a cultural official under

the People's Republic. More specifically, Zhou Yang served as the mediator for a process of profound theoretical borrowings between Mao and the Russian nineteenth-century aesthetician Nikolai Chernyshevsky. If, outside of the Chinese context, Chernyshevsky is perhaps best known for his rambling revolutionary novel *What Is to be Done?* (1863), and for his influence on a generation of Russian revolutionaries, Zhou Yang's writings over 1936–42 reveal a persistent concern for Chernyshevsky's aesthetics, especially his theoretical treatise *The Aesthetic Relation of Art to Reality*, which Zhou Yang ultimately translated into Chinese in 1942 after its appearance in the Soviet English-language journal *International Literature* in 1935. The importance of Chernyshevsky for Zhou Yang, as for others, lies in the fact that Chernyshevsky provided a coherent theoretical justification for a resolutely realist aesthetics, one that emerged in opposition to the prevalence of neo-Hegelian idealist modes of aesthetics in the Russia of the nineteenth century. If, for idealist aestheticians, beauty existed as a permutation of absolute spirit, Chernyshevsky invoked the category of 'life' in order to point towards a realist, materialist aesthetics, asserting 'that is beautiful in which we see life such as it should be according to our conceptions; that is beautiful which expresses by itself life or reminds of life'. Yet for Chernyshevsky, his category of life was not an existential concept withdrawn from the complexities of social relations but rather a resolutely political one, in that the conception of 'life' that informs beauty is itself sundered by the different aesthetic horizons of beauty attached to different classes. Chernyshevsky therefore counterpoises the aesthetic horizons of peasants and the ruling class, arguing, for the former, 'the description of beauty in folk songs will not contain a single attribute of beauty which would not be a sign of flourishing health and balanced strength of body, the consequence always of a life of plenty with constant hard, though not excessive, work,' whereas, for the



Zhou Yang. PC: Wikimedia Commons.

bourgeoisie, their conception of beauty is an ethereal one, arising from and validating 'a life without physical labour'.

Chernyshevsky's text therefore offers a conception of partisan aesthetics—an aesthetics given in the material relations of social life—that was to inform the entire Chinese socialist project, especially in terms of how the problematic of life came to generate a solution for how writers of intellectual backgrounds were to write in the service of the masses. Zhou Yang's encounter with Chernyshevsky via *International Literature* informed his theoretical engagements over the 1930s and 1940s, and so too did Chernyshevsky's category of 'life' supply a major theoretical edifice of the Maoist project. But between Chernyshevsky's text in the abstract and Mao's Talks lay a series of mediations involving problems of

translation, and it is here that Zhou Yang becomes centrally relevant as a theorist who mediated between Chernyshevsky and Mao, and in the process of doing so also transformed the theoretical significance of life itself.

Rendering ‘Life’

The problem of language and conceptual precision that confronted Zhou Yang was that of how to render ‘life’ in such a way that it would come to articulate the problem of social relations and the transformation of the writing subject, being, therefore, adequate to the rich theoretical position of such a concept in Chernyshevsky’s account. The salience of a social and historical conception of life, one that would incorporate an emergent understanding of labour as the basis of the social and of social relations, may be judged from the multiple renderings of the English term ‘life’ that pervaded Zhou Yang’s successive translations of, and responses to, Chernyshevsky.

In his first two essays in which he referred explicitly to Chernyshevsky and cited at considerable length from Chernyshevsky’s treatise, entitled ‘Art and Life’ (艺术与人生) and ‘We Need a New Aesthetics’ (我们需要新的美学), both published in 1937, Zhou Yang rendered ‘life’ as *rensheng* (人生). Only later did he change the translation to the more precise *shenghuo* (生活) in his 1941 and 1942 treatments, including in the preface to his 1942 translation of Chernyshevsky. These two renderings or modes of translanguaging practice carry their own connotations and nuances. *Rensheng* echoed a much earlier set of debates that had emerged as part of the 1919 May Fourth Movement, in which liberal intellectuals committed themselves to a project of ‘literature for life’ (文学为人生). In this register, then, *rensheng* maintained a fundamentally metaphysical valence. Yet even at this earlier moment, the details of Zhou’s text reveal an understanding of the class content of aesthetics that radically

anticipates the theoretical problems of the 1940s and Mao’s Talks. In a gesture that draws unmistakably from Chernyshevsky, in his ‘We Need a New Aesthetics’ Zhou argues that, due to the close relationship between aesthetics and social conditions, the possibility of aesthetic horizons that are particular to specific class formations, such that ‘in any given epoch the conceptions of beauty on the part of different social strata are radically different from one another, and are indeed directly opposite’ (Zhou 1937a, 218). Only at the end of this essay does Zhou invoke Chernyshevsky explicitly as one of the theorists who may be recruited to the task of constructing a new science of aesthetics. Zhou acknowledges the Russian writer as having derived his theoretical impetus from Feuerbach, and cites his formulation of ‘beauty is life’ (人生即美) as the centre of his theoretical project.

While these early engagements with Chernyshevsky emerged out of the Shanghai literary scene, Zhou’s move to Yan’an during wartime as part of a larger contingent of intellectuals lent a new urgency to the problem of the cultural subject in rural conditions and amid the exigencies of wartime mobilisation. This urgency made itself felt in Zhou Yang’s ongoing excavations of Chernyshevsky above all through a shift in translation, to *shenghuo*, which situated ‘life’ as a problem of social relations that not only comprised the aesthetic horizon of the masses but also, crucially, held out the possibility of transforming the intellectual. This was true especially of Zhou Yang’s 1941 essay ‘A Casual Discussion on Literature and Life’ (文艺与生活漫谈), which may be read as the singularly most important document in raising the central categories of Mao’s Talks, before the Talks themselves. The problem that Zhou addresses is the relationship between art and life, and he makes the origins of this problematic explicit, proclaiming that ‘with respect to aesthetics, I am a loyal follower of Chernyshevsky. His famous formula of “beauty is life” carries a fundamental truth’ (Zhou 1941, 325).

Zhou Yang's discussion is by no means a mechanical folding of literature into life but rather an examination of the complex dialectical relations between the two. The importance of life lies in the fact that it provides the author with the materials and experiences that are the ultimate source of cultural production, and yet no simple equivalence can be drawn between what Zhou Yang describes as 'the practice of life' (生活实践) and 'the practice of creation' (创作实践). Rather, the problem of the author is that of mediation, how the author mediates between the material substance of social relations and life, and the transformation of life into the work of art. The formation of a relationship between the author and the life of the masses of a kind that can yield artistic creation is, for Zhou, a long and painful process. His imagery anticipates Mao's Talks, and so deserves to be quoted at length:

'To be suited [to life] is not the kind of thing that can be done in a moment. It requires a relative period of time amidst this life. To go everywhere and observe flowers from horseback is rather easy, but it cannot yield any real results. It is necessary to participate in some actual work, and in order to do this, you shouldn't fear any difficulties ... Merge into one with the people around you, study from them, and ask for guidance from them. Don't blame them for not understanding you, instead you should seek to understand them' (Zhou 1941, 330).

In this instance, the significance of life for literary creation becomes something other than merely being that which is reflected in the art work, even in a highly mediated or technical form, and instead becomes the basis for the transformation of the subject position of the writer. This transformation is one that rests on and enables a new set of social relationships, in which the intellectual ceases to be a purveyor of intellectual enlightenment to the masses. Thus, further on, Zhou asserts that 'a creator must broadly, in many respects and deeply merge with people in everyday life, you must become friends with them, talk about family matters, intimate affairs of the heart, so

that between you there is no longer any kind of psychological forbearance or distance' (Zhou 1941, 333). Having done so, 'at this time the true masses will become visible to you, what you understand will no longer be an abstract concept of the masses, but concrete individuals of flesh and blood' (Zhou 1941, 333).

Zhou Yang's translation of Chernyshevsky's aesthetic treatise in its entirety and his accompanying essay in the *Liberation Daily* marks both the culmination of a process of theoretical development and a text of theoretical importance that was directly proximate to the Yan'an Talks. In this article, which initially appeared under the title 'Materialist Aesthetics: An Introduction to Chernyshevsky's Aesthetics', Zhou reprised some of the basic points of emphasis that had emerged as early as 1937, including the orientation between social class and horizons of aesthetic beauty. More important is that Zhou also brings a critical light to bear on the limits of Chernyshevsky's conception of realism, arguing, therefore, that the Russian writer maintains a passive conception of the process through which art may be said to reflect reality, and that he therefore ignores the active function of art in the transformation of society (Zhou 1942, 371–72). Taking Zhou Yang's responses to Chernyshevsky across the whole period of the 1930s and 1940s seriously, then, the problematic of life assumes a great theoretical complexity. 'Life' comes to mark the material set of social relations among the masses that also define class-specific aesthetic preferences. Crucially, for the Maoist project, including Mao's Yan'an Talks, life also provides the conditions for the transformation of the intellectual, a transformation that is felt above all at the level of aesthetic experience, whereby the intellectual comes to assume the aesthetic experience of the masses as their own. Yet they must do so, also, in order that art and literature may come to transform the conditions of life of the masses. This complex dialectic is central to Mao's Talks, and it relies substantially on a conceptual vocabulary of life produced by Zhou Yang through his engagements with

Chernyshevsky, a powerful intellectual genealogy that has been overlooked. To live in Maoist fashion, then, meant to commit to the refashioning of the intellectual amidst the quotidian life of the masses, whose conditions of daily labour would also provide the conditions for a new, partisan aesthetics.

Life after Socialism

The theoretical demand that writers enter life was soon institutionalised under the People's Republic via the ongoing dispatch of writers to live amongst the masses, signified by the terms 'experiencing life' (体验生活) and 'entering into life' (深入生活). The contours of 'life', and the conditions under which life would remain the basis of literary creation, remained the basis of varied debates around problems of aesthetics and cultural production through the socialist period, with the Russian lineage of this vocabulary being more or less visible according to shifting political conjunctures. The theoretical richness of Maoist life could not, however, be sustained through the Cultural Revolution, which, in addition to the toppling of Zhou Yang and others from power, also witnessed the hollowing-out of life as a set of quotidian social relations and its replacement with the hyper-aestheticised heroes and villains of the model works, as an ultimately failed attempt to stage a new set of communist social relations through a literal life or death struggle between revolution and counterrevolution. The reduction and immiseration of 'life' in the Cultural Revolution portended the re-biologisation of life that rears its head in the present.

Here too, words matter. In the early reform period, an existential conception of life as *rensheng* reappeared as part of a renewed humanist discourse, which, at its most reflective moments, offered a melancholic response to the eclipse of the socialist project. Such a reflection may be found in the 1982 novel *Life* (人生) by celebrated author Lu Yao, recently rendered in

a superb translation by Chloe Estep. The novel marks an emergent existentialist scepticism as to the possibilities of transformation in a post-revolutionary period, narrated through the wholly accidental encounter between a teacher and the conditions of manual labour. This degree of introspection is absent from our contemporary moment. The appearance of life as *shenghuo* in contemporary political language is overwhelmingly recoded in the depoliticised, developmentalist discourse as 'standard of living' (生活水平) or else as the class-bound 'civilised habits of life' (文明生活习惯), which provide a fitting accomplice to the renewed biological notion of *shengming*. Life as *shenghuo* has been deprived of its transformative dimensions.

A political and medical crisis like that of the present opens different paths. A new fascist politics defined by the biologisation of the nation-state under the rubric of life as *shengming* beckons. The alternative, if there is one, is to renew our bonds of solidarity and social life to each other. The political and aesthetic lineage of Maoist life provides some advice as to how, in these times, live a non-fascist life. ■



Nora, Artwork by arindacraciun.com.
(P.123) Fan Yusu poses for a photo in Beijing.
April 25, 2017. PC: Wang Pan/IC.



A Proletarian Nora

Discussing Fan Yusu

Federico PICERNI

In 2017, migrant worker Fan Yusu became an overnight sensation in China after publishing her memoir online. Despite the fact that she has produced several more literary works, her artistic production is seldom considered from a literary perspective. To fill this gap, this essay endeavours to analyse some of the main elements that shape Fan's output, arguing that it is an exemplar of contemporary working-class literature.

When Fan Yusu published online her autobiography in April 2017, it became a sensation overnight. 'I Am Fan Yusu' (我是范雨素), her story as a rural-urban migrant woman in China, went viral in a few hours. Fan was born in 1973 into a poor rural family from Xiangyang, Hubei province, and moved to Beijing in 1994. At first, she lived with her husband, a violent and alcoholic man who eventually left her and their two daughters. In the city, she became a domestic worker, attending to the daughter of a rich tycoon's concubine, far away from her daughters in Picun, an urban village in the outskirts of the capital. Today, she still does the same job, but for a different employer. In Picun, Fan came in contact with a literary group formed by other migrant workers interested in literature and writing, eventually becoming their best-known member and acting as the editor-in-chief of their self-published journal, *New Workers Literature* (新工人文学).

Although media attention eventually faded, her name has not been forgotten, especially among those interested in contemporary questions of inequality, labour, and working-class writing. While it is hard to find any study dedicated specifically to her work in Western academia (there has been some discussion, for instance in Guo 2017), research in China generally tends to focus on the 'media phenomenon' generated by her memoir and sudden celebrity. Scholarly articles that analyse her writing from a literary point of view are conspicuously fewer in number (for instance, see Li 2017 and Xi 2018). Yet, Fan's literary production is extremely interesting in terms of the provocative questions it raises regarding both migrant-worker/subaltern writing 'at large' and literature in general. For instance, as pointed out by Zhang Huiyu (2017), the surge of writing 'from below', of which Fan is a representative, breaks the tendency towards the professionalisation of literature, stressing the right to culture of individuals and groups belonging to subaltern classes.

Discussion outside academia has been livelier, including not a few attacks on Fan's work for its perceived low literary quality. Prejudice? It is hard to say. For sure, literature produced by migrant workers in China is often considered of high social significance but low aesthetic value (van Crevel 2017). It is ironic that such a critique also came from Yu Xiuhua, a female poet from rural China who has been ostracised herself for not being a specialist writer—indeed, Fan and Yu share a number of similarities, both having become 'self-made' literary sensations with a little help from the Internet. This, in turn, prompted another well-known poet, Wang Jiaxin, to respond with a passionate piece defending Fan from this unlikely critic and questioning the aesthetic sense from which we assess works of literature (Wang 2017).

Fan herself has rebuked some of the criticism directed against her, hinting at the aforementioned prejudice: 'People who read my piece said that it was actually written by Peking University people, that someone wanted to push an illiterate nanny into the temple of literature. I don't understand—is the temple of literature perhaps already full? And can't I enter it, unless someone pushes me in?' (Fan 2018c: 8). She has, however, refused any 'representative' status imposed on her (Fan 2018a) and has been quite elusive with journalists. When she did meet some, she later wrote a humorous piece explaining how it was actually her who interviewed them about the conditions of the urban youth (Fan 2018b).

The debate on the 'literariness' (文学性) of working-class writers, although undoubtedly relevant, risks turning sterile if our aesthetic is not contested. In other words, what is the criterion to measure the level of literariness of a work? Is it always valid, or even universal? Where is it positioned in the web of power and class relations in the cultural field? This is why I have chosen to use these pages to reflect on some elements that characterise Fan's writing, in order to contribute to a sketching out of the new subaltern autobiographical literature produced by her and others.

Life as a Book

'I Am Fan Yusu' opens with a fairly 'literary' *incipit*, orchestrated to reflect, first and foremost, the author's passion for literature: 'My life is like a book too hard to read, so clumsily has fate bound me.' These opening lines foreground the possibility for literature to become a book telling the tale(s) of subaltern lives, dragging them out of invisibility, but they also show Fan's attention to stylistic refinement. The book image recurs later in the story, in an encouragement to read (and write) despite the gloomy plot: 'A book never read by anyone is sad to see, like a person who has never lived decently.' Indeed, Fan, an avid reader since childhood, has a very pure idea of literature. According to her, good literature should not only speak of social ills but of the human soul, and she lists Calvino, Carver, Han Shaogong, and Kafka among her favourite writers precisely because she thinks they were successful in this respect (Fan 2019). This idea is reflected in her efforts at refining her story with metaphors, images, and stylistic devices to make a literary tale out of it, rather than a mere account of her life; in other words, to write not only a reportage, but 'true' literature. Her accomplishments in terms of narrative structure, register, and style have been praised, for example, by Qin Xiaoyu, the editor of *The Verse of Us* (我的诗篇), an anthology of migrant-worker poetry (Qin 2017).

Family is one of the first and central elements in Fan's work. In an earlier piece of writing, 'Peasant Big Brother' (农民大哥), she recalls her older brother's delusional efforts to become a famous writer and their family's deprivations to support him, offering a staggering insight into their poor living conditions (Fan 2016). Her father never meant much for her, and his presence was like 'the shadow of a big tree'. She and her mother, on the contrary, were very close: the latter is described as an 'exceptionally appreciable talent', having 'awe-inspiring prestige', and always standing by her oldest son even if his delusions were making

him into the joke of the village. In brief, the mother is the strongest person in Fan's rural family, sublimated as someone 'with a talent in speaking, who sounded like a state leader as soon as she opened her mouth' as a stark contrast to the stereotype of old, ignorant rural women (Fan 2017a). After her first trip out of the village when she was 12 (to 'walk barefoot to the end of the world'), Fan was branded as a bringer of shame merely for being a girl who dared to walk out of the house (whereas men's mobility was encouraged), but her mother continued to show her love. The mother's role is so central that, originally, the title of what then became 'I Am Fan Yusu' was supposed to be 'My Mother', before it was changed on the editor's suggestion (I am grateful to Paola Iovene and Zhang Huiyu for sharing this insight).

However, the stigma for breaking such an ossified gender rule continued to haunt Fan, and years later she was not allowed to stay in the village after she returned with her daughters on the run from her violent husband. Despite the persistence of motherly support, the rupture of patriarchal gender rules cast Fan out of her original family and became a sort of 'rite of passage' into the floating population for both her and her daughters. Their destiny of economic instability is thus represented exactly as the result of an intersectional oppression of class and gender relations. Fan acknowledges she has become 'a guest in the village that generated and nurtured [her]', and that her daughters are 'duckweed floating rootless in the water'.

Forced separation is what characterises their life in the city, a theme expanded on in her poem 'Domestic Worker' (家政女工; Fan 2017b), dedicated to the paradoxical and painful contradiction of having to rock someone else's baby to sleep while longing for her own. Her job is to feign 'happiness and cheerfulness'; however, in doing so, all she can think of are her own children: 'My daughters / to provide for you / I work as a nanny for city people / my daughters / are now orphans with a mother.' This poem is a picture of the material

and sentimental conditions of migrant families, capturing their social condition of inequality compared to wealthier city residents.

Fan's care for her own family broadens into care for other migrant children as well, in a sort of extended family. The second part of 'I Am Fan Yusu', which focuses on the author's urban life, expands on this theme. Fan's denunciation of the living conditions of migrant children includes two elements. The first is education: poverty and lack of an urban household registration force migrant children to attend unofficial, low-quality schools, outside of the ordinary education system. The second (and more essential) is family. Fan writes of her older daughter as quite educated and generally well-off, thanks to her relatively constant presence. Her situation is compared with that of other migrant children whose mothers are away, or whose parents' marriages are fragile or broken. They are left essentially unattended with no one to take care of them, and remain largely uneducated: 'Perhaps people like to divide into groups, just like animals also form flocks and packs. My daughter's two friends are like this. Their fate is indeed a most tragic one' (Fan 2017a). For Fan, this is the fate of social and moral degradation.

Fan's work, including and beyond 'I Am Fan Yusu', thus sounds like a modern cry to 'Save the children!' almost a century after Lu Xun (1981) wrote his 'A Madman's Diary' (狂人日记). However, while the children Lu Xun was addressing were facing the danger of falling victim to a 'cannibalistic' feudal society, today's (migrant) children risk being reduced to mere bodies for the workforce, deprived of agency and subjectivity: 'As no dear one would pray to the Heavens for them, they have become screws in the workshop of the world, terracotta warriors of the assembly line, living a marionette's life' (Fan 2017a). Not only is this passage very evocative, but it is also thought-provoking in its connection with another migrant author, as the image of workers as terracotta warriors can be found in a poem by Xu Lizhi (2015), a Foxconn worker whose suicide in 2014 won his poetry posthumous

fame (Pozzana 2019, 195; van Crevel 2019). This intertextual element suggests a certain degree of personal identification with the industrial army of migrant workers.

Class inequality in family relations is further represented in Fan's depiction of life in her employer's house, where she, a migrant woman, has to live separately from her children in order to take care of the baby of a tycoon and his young mistress, who humiliates herself living like 'a concubine in a palace drama'. Witnessing such a regressive gender and social practice where economically-dependent women act as second wives for rich men leaves her wondering 'whether I was living in the golden age of the Tang dynasty or in the Qing empire, rather than in socialist New China'.

Flowers of the Motherland

All these themes—left-behind children, family solidarity, social inequality—are present in an ardent poem written by Fan Yusu in October 2015, right after the case of a group suicide of young left-behind children in Bijie, Guizhou province (Xinhua 2015). In the poem, she successfully turns an individual case into an utterance of collective indignation, identifying herself with the plight of left-behind children, and, more generally, with the condition of migrant workers: 'Child, I and your mother have an identical name, / we are called rural migrants / you have a name to share with rural migrant children: "left-behind child" / my children have a name to share with rural migrant children too: "floating children"' (Fan 2015).

Using the vocabulary of social science and journalism, Fan proudly takes on the term 'rural migrant' (农民工). This is not a predictable move, since some, even in Picun, openly refuse such a word as derogatory, preferring terms like 'new workers' (新工人) instead (Huang 2016). Fan, on the contrary, reappropriates the stigmatising term—

described as 'a discriminating label' later in the poem—and uses it to forge a collective identity for migrant families within the unequal social space of the city. This is powerfully expressed in these verses: 'Beijing is big, so big, / it can find room for a hundred hollow villas for county magistrates / Beijing is small, so small, / it cannot find room for one single school desk for a migrant child.'

What Fan asks in the ending verses of the poem is social recognition for migrant children as peers to all other children in/of China, granting them the right to be part of the society they feel excluded from: 'In the next life / all mothers' children / will not be called "left-behind children", / will not be called "floating children", / they will all be called / with the name Grandpa Mao (毛爷爷) chose for them / 60 years ago, / flowers of the motherland' (needless to say, 'Grandpa Mao' refers to Mao Zedong). The aforementioned collective identity is diluted in a broader national dimension where social differences are levelled by the common belonging to the same national community, conjured up with the explicit references to the motherland (祖国), as well as to its socialist history. Fan's cry to 'Save the (migrant) children!' is couched in hope for the motherland itself to hear the cry and take back the children it appears to have forgotten. In other words, it is a cry for social recognition, a demand to be acknowledged as integral parts of the country, and, more specifically, of the city; a request that remains unattainable as long as such subjects remain socially and culturally silenced.

A Proletarian Nora

Another provoking, and slightly daring, literary parallel can be drawn. In Henrik Ibsen's famous play *A Doll's House*, the female protagonist Nora eventually breaks with the dominant patriarchal family system and walks out of the house where she served as a wife and a mother. In his sharp critique of the play, Lu

Xun aptly remarked: ‘Nora really has only two options: to fall into degradation or to return home’ (2017, 257). His argument was actually quite progressive, as it highlighted how women could not hope for real emancipation without obtaining equal economic rights, which is no less true today than it was in the nineteenth century. However, similar to how Zheng Xiaoqiong, one of the most accomplished migrant-worker poets, describes the women workers she poetically narrates (Zheng 2012), Fan Yusu is a ‘Nora’ who has neither returned home nor fallen into degradation, but is trying to find her own path against all the odds. This proletarian Nora, alongside many others, picks up the story narrated by Ibsen (and Lu Xun) right where they left off.

Family and literature are two key elements that can allow these legions of proletarian, floating ‘Noras’ (and their children) to survive, according to Fan. What can be deduced from her work is a particular kind of subaltern consciousness, typical of her (our) time, centred on family rather than class. This undoubtedly has much to do with Fan’s own life experience: the ‘matrilineal’ line of support from mother to daughter (her mother–herself–her daughters) that we find in her story is a response to the intersection of gender and class oppression that underpins her hardships. It is likewise beyond doubt that her attention to children, subaltern of the subaltern, comes from Fan’s own personal sensibility. However, as we have seen, there is also a wider dimension at play. Family in the urban context reemerges as a space for mutual solidarity as well, since sharing the same social conditions implies the possibility of passing family-like love and empathy on to others outside the household. This suggests that it is possible to effectively build a sort of solidarity network: ‘On the streets of Beijing, I hug every deformed wanderer, every sufferer from mental illnesses. I use my hugs to pass on motherly love, to return motherly love’ (Fan 2017a). Indeed, this kind of solidarity for Fan stems precisely from the question ‘What can I do for my mother?’, posed in an earlier passage.

Through this idea of solidarity and of the agents able to effect it, we get a sense of Fan’s ‘subaltern consciousness’, significantly different (but no less collective) from what we would traditionally consider as class consciousness. In point of fact, however, this is not surprising. In a context marked by a general depoliticisation of society (Wang 2006), the unending search for a collective space of solidarity needs to find new solutions. Under such circumstances, further complicated by the absence of an inclusive welfare system, what steps in is the household, traditionally the provider of solidarity and institution for social reproduction in rural China.

Furthermore, Fan Yusu, alongside other female members of the Picun literature group, lead much-exploited domestic workers, generally invisible in the urban order, to enter as a whole social group into the ‘temple of literature’ (which is apparently not quite full yet). Indeed, Fan’s choice of the autobiographical genre should make us read her memoir as a tale bespeaking not only of individual hopes and motives, but also as an invaluable insight into the subjective conditions of such a social group. This provides some food for thought as we strive to grasp the multiplicity and complexity of what can be called subaltern writing today. It also shines some light on the new Chinese working class, in all its fluidity and diversity, following what the Italian worker-turned-sociologist Aris Accornero described as the transition from twentieth-century ‘Labour’ to the mosaic of today’s ‘labours’ (Accornero 2000). This form of subaltern autobiographical writing should be approached with an open mind, addressing the sociocultural questions it advances and the challenges it poses to the dominant conception of aesthetics.

Now the question is: can and will ‘Noras’ become ‘Lu Xuns’? ■



Andy Warhol, *Hammer and Sickle*, 1976.

Poetry after the Future

Christian SORACE

In this essay, Sorace reads migrant-worker poetry alongside Marx to index the trace of a different future in the exploitation and alienation of the present. Worker poets write about lost youth, severed fingers, irregular periods, and labour congealed in commodities for export. The future promised by communism has been erased by a seemingly eternal capitalist present. To dream again requires new acts of poetic and political imagination.

Do people need a future in order to live?

This essay begins from the premise that the loss of the promise of communism is also a loss of the horizon of future. Communism is not another discarded utopia—as Rancière (2013, 63) puts it, ‘only a variant of this much older lie’ that leads ‘us to believe that something of what we waited for has come to pass’. Communism, to read Rancière (2012, 209) against himself, inaugurates ‘the revelation of a different world and the initiation of a relationship between beings’.

Communism does not promise a world without negativity, desire, or death, but a movement which abolishes the antagonism that consigns the majority of the world's population to a life of superfluity. The lucky ones, after all, are still appendages of capital accumulation. Under communism, there will be antagonisms, struggles, and politics, but they will be oriented toward a new lodestar of creation of different modes of social value rather than the inflammation and immiseration of profit-driven life. Communism is the promise that capitalism is not the terminal point in which the so-called 'end of history' will also be the annihilation of humanity.

The profound repercussions of what Ken Jowitt (1992) called the 'Leninist extinction' are still being felt today. This is not to glorify or demonise the complex historical records, legacies, and variations among actually existing communist regimes, which has been done elsewhere (Ghodsee 2017; Sorace et al. 2019), but salvage the form of the communist ideal from the rubble of the past. The receding of the 'communist horizon' (Dean 2018) gave us the permanent night of 'capitalist realism' (Fisher 2009) in which our imaginations and futures have been straight-jacketed by the forms of late capitalism and liberal democracy. Since the end of the Cold War, we dream only of apocalypse and not of a better world.

This essay proposes that the themes of migrant worker poetry in contemporary China bear the traces of the loss of the communist horizon. Chinese workers live under the paradoxical condition in which their emancipation was declared to have been achieved, which forecloses its possibility in the future. As a result, their lives are suspended in an eternal present of capital accumulation dressed up in socialist garb. In Alessandro Russo's formulation: 'If the main barrier against the political existence of works is the reference to a mummified working class enshrined in official discourse, nothing that is politically novel will be able to come into being unless there is an explicit, conscious effort to keep

this fiction at bay' (Russo 2019, 35). Although I agree with Russo's point, fictions are not so easily displaced and brushed aside especially when they have the force of the Party-state apparatus behind them. The dual symbolic and political bind for the Chinese working class is that they live entombed in the representation of past emancipation in a world of capitalist exploitation (Franceschini and Sorace 2019).

Drawing from *Iron Moon: An Anthology of Chinese Migrant Worker Poetry* edited by Qin Xiaoyu and translated by Eleanor Goodman, and *Selected Poems of Zhou Qizao* translated by Song Deli, in this essay I argue that migrant worker poetry is a genre of mourning. As Claudia Pozzana puts it: 'In this era, when political visions of labour have become rarefied, the poetry of migrant workers can be read as a symptom of unmoored subjective existence' (Pozzana 2019, 193). What has unmoored the political and subjective existence of the working class is the loss of communism as a horizon. Without reducing migrant worker poetry to these categories, I have divided the rest of this essay into four experiences of loss: the loss of autonomy and experience of alienation; the exhaustion of vitality and wasted youth; the dismemberment of the body; and the loss of the future.

Machinic Organs

A key tenet of Marxism is that labour-power is a commodity that the worker needs to sell in order to live. The proletariat is the class 'who live only so long as they find work, and who find work only so long as their labour increases capital' (Marx and Engels 1848). A proletariat's life depends on the needs, fluctuations, and flows of capital, meaning most of us are 'allowed to live only insofar as the interest of the ruling class requires it' (Marx and Engels 1848). When a person is no longer profitable, the biopolitical state steps in to guarantee the minimum conditions for existence and prevent

social disorder. The life and death stakes of the labour process for social reproduction is why Marx and Engels refer to work under capitalism as ‘unfreedom.’

In his *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx describes the selling of labour power for a wage as a form of ‘self-estrangement’ through which the worker’s activity ‘belongs to another; it is the loss of his self’ (Marx 1844). Both the products and profits generated by the worker become someone else’s property. The worker is emptied of energy, vitality, and youth in the process of producing wealth for the capitalist. Under capitalism, work is a ‘labour of self-sacrifice, of mortification’ (Marx 1844). In later works, Marx further explores how the individual is de-centred and stripped of autonomy in the labour process. In *Capital Vol. 1*, Marx argues that the worker is ‘a living appendage of the machine’ and ‘mere fragment of his own body’ (Marx 1867). In ‘The Fragment on Machines’ in *The Grundrisse*, Marx sketches how the worker’s consciousness becomes a nodal point subsumed into ‘the total process of the machinery itself’, transforming ‘living labour into a mere accessory of this machinery’ through which the ‘realisation process of capital’ is achieved (Marx 1857–61). From the vantage point of the proletariat, Freud’s famous statement—‘Man has, as it were, become a kind of prosthetic God. When he puts on all his auxiliary organs, he is truly magnificent; but those organs have not grown on him and they still give him much trouble at times’ (Freud 1989)—appears as a secular humanist dream in which man remains firmly at the centre of the universe, in the place formerly occupied by God, despite being subjected to the vicissitudes of the unconscious.

Migrant worker poetry gives poetic form to Marx’s insights. Poet Chi Moshu (1980–present) echoes Marx in his question: ‘Can it be that we and our lives / are mere flesh accessories to the machines?’ (Qin 2016, 142). Other poets call attention to how the labouring body submits but never quite adapts to the demands of production and rhythms of the assembly line. Chen Caifeng (1979–present)

writes of being ‘under fluorescent lights, frantically / seeking out any possible happiness’ while feeling a ‘panic implanted into the body’ (Qin 2016, 96). The body is no longer the biological body but a blur of repetitive motion and localised pain, a nervous system calibrated to machinic pulsations (see Kindler’s essay in the present issue). Zheng Xiaoqiong (1980–present) describes how under the pressure of production, ‘the cliff of the body collapses’ and women’s menstrual cycles are replaced by a ‘life time of irregular periods’ (Qin 2016, 124). The temporalities of production imprint themselves on the body (Pun 2005).

But machines are not necessarily cold, impersonal, and in opposition to the worker. Several poets express comradely affection and sympathy for machinery (Dean 2019, 65). People and machinery share similar fates: they wear out and are discarded when they no longer increase capital. Tie Gu (1969–present) mourns an overworked tower crane that was forced ‘with the boss’s tacit consent / to shift heavy loads over and over until one day / it dropped its worn-out head into a news report’ and in the next line adds ‘my mother was a similar scene.’ The poem ends with self-reflection of the poet’s own ‘squandered’ life (Qin 2016, 49). Similarly, Tang Yihong (1970–present) eulogises a mixer that ‘doesn’t belong to itself’ but to the ‘construction site, the factory, the assembly line / to this gloomy life and reality / and even the rust on its body / will be beaten off with a heavy hammer’. The worker’s alienation from his own body is mirrored in the poet’s memory of the mixer’s ‘distorted face, and its inner / thundering and pain / don’t belong to it either’ (Qin 2016, 54).

Wasted Youth

Workers’ youth is not their own. In 1957, Mao addressed Chinese students: ‘The world is yours, as well as ours, but in the last analysis, it is yours. You young people, full of vigour and vitality, are in the bloom of life, like the

sun at eight or nine in the morning. Our hope is placed on you. The world belongs to you, China's future belongs to you.' Contrast this optimism with these haunting lines from Xu Lizhi (1990–2014): 'I swallowed an iron moon / they called it a screw / I swallowed industrial wastewater and unemployment forms / bent over machines, our youth died young' (Qin 2016, 198). There is no sun in Xu Lizhi's poetry, only an 'iron moon' in the back of one's throat. The vitality of youth is spent in an effort to stay alive. Responding to a local journalist's question about the future, Xu Lizhi said: 'We all hope our lives will become better and better but most of us don't control our destiny' (Rauhala 2015). The poet's suicide is a monument to the absence of the future.

Xu Lizhi's comrade-poet-in-arms Zhou Qizao (1985–present) vividly depicts scenes of youth wasted on the production line: 'The youth on the / production line / Pale, weak / Quiet, stagnant and lonely / like weathered trees and / fallen leaves' (Zhou 2019, 32). The rosy faces of young workers etiolate like dead leaves. In the poet's account, youth and its possibilities are constrained to the increasingly 'narrow and narrow' space of the assembly line. A few stanzas down, the poet describes labour as a metabolic exchange of life for commodities and profits: 'Our brisk youth is bound / onto a line / Our young blood is used to / burn / to burn the passion of life.' Capital and blood are revealed as the dual substances of political economy sublimated in commodity fetishism.

The first stanza of Xie Xiangnan's (1974–present) 'Orders of the Front Lines' shifts registers to the scatological:

My finest five years went into the input
feeder of a machine
I watched those five youthful years come
out of the machine's
Asshole-each formed into an elliptical
plastic toy,
slippery, sometimes orange,
sometimes bright red and green eggshells.
(I've heard they're shipped to America,
shipped

to Western Europe as Christmas toys, sold
one after another
to blue-eyed children . . .)
(Qin 2016, 79)

The anus of the machine shifts out the poet's youth in the form of a plastic toy. Rather than the circulatory system of blood/capital, Xie Xiangnan explores the digestive system of consumption/waste through which commodities are produced only to be discarded.



Piero Manzoni, *Merda d'artista*, 1961.

Zheng Xiaoqiong's poem 'Woman Worker: Youth Pinned to a Station' depicts how the worker and her labour congealed in the commodity are intertwined yet separated. The commodity's life-cycle begins with her own migration from 'an inland village / to a factory by the sea / all the way to a shelf in America'. Confined to the assembly line, she can only imagine the destiny of the commodity that carries a piece of her with it. But she cannot daydream for long because she too is a commodity subject to the disciplined temporality of production: 'She rubs her swollen red eyes / and sticks herself back / into the flow of products' (Qin 2016, 124).



‘A Boy With a Severed Finger Examines His Hand on a Balcony’

Maurizio Cattelan,
Billboard in the High Line Park, New York City, 2012.
PC: Animalnewyork.com.

Working on construction sites, mines, or on assembly lines wears the body down as it valorises Capital. In the Marxist vernaculars of the twentieth century, language was attentive to the materiality of processes and bodies.

In Mandarin Chinese, the word for exploitation (剥削) conveys an image of layers of flesh being peeled, scraped, and pared down. Today, the visceral dimension of production is sublimated in the disembodied discourses of algorithms, statistics, and finance, which is why poetry is needed as a reminder of the sacrifices of the body on which the system rests.

In her poem ‘Trial’, Li Zhishui (1984–present) differentiates between what is quantifiable and unquantifiable in the production process:

In one minute, how much wood can be sawed
how many meters of cloth can be woven
how many batteries can be assembled
all of this can be calculated
but how much sweat can flow in a minute

how much dust and dark particulate can be taken into the lungs and organs
how many people wander out of their villages
how many fingers are eaten by machines
how many loves ones are separated by blood
that can’t be calculated or figured
the calculator and stop watch stare at me
like I’m an accomplice.
(Qin 2016, 183)

Although the worker sells her labour-power for a wage determined by socially necessary labour time, what happens to the body exceeds calculation, which is to say, is beyond remuneration. How does one account for phantom digits?

Severed fingers have a ghostly presence in migrant worker poetry. The poet Li Shougang (1971–present) recalls the experience of losing four fingers on his left hand to a high-powered punch press with the lines: ‘I had to



Vladimir Abat-Cherkasov,
The Revolution Continues,
undated.

face the pain / like I faced my damaged left hand / holding onto my heart' (Qin 2016, 70). Chi Moshu teaches how fingers cannot be reattached if the bones are crushed in his poem 'Severed Finger, No Sound of Crying' (Qin 2016, 156). Zheng Dong (1981–present) calls on his fellow workers to 'let our severed fingers make it to California / to collapse in front of the bosses' properties / let them entwine them like ferocious ghosts, generation after generation' (Qin 2016, 163). Zheng Xiaoqiang writes in and of the 'language of severed fingers' muted by the noise of 'the GDP's language' and 'language of official projects'. The poet gathers 'these sad languages' in order to 'speak them softly / in the roar of the machines' (Qin 2016, 122).

Passport to the Future

As inheritors of the revolution, the future of the Chinese working class is already behind them. Conversely, the factories of capitalism

only offer a future in which 'the assembly line is our inescapable destiny' (Zhou 2019, 33). Chinese workers are trapped between the past glories of the Communist Party and the eternal recurrence of the capitalist present.

The Chinese migrant worker is buried under the bureaucracy of identity papers, residency permits, and employment forms. In his poem 'My Soviet Passport' (1929), Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893–1930) lashes out at such bureaucracy with the ferocious opening line 'I'd tear like a wolf at bureaucracy.' And yet, despite his hatred of bureaucracy, he prizes his red Soviet passport, which unlike the passports of other nation-states, promises access to a future of international proletarian solidarity.

With what delight
that gendarme cast
would have
strung-up and whipped raw
because I hold
in my hands
hammered-fast
sickle-clasped
My red Soviet passport.

His Soviet passport is a 'bomb', 'rattlesnake huge and long / with at least / 20 fangs / poison-tipped', and 'razor double-edged stropped' that strikes fear in the police while eliciting a glance of solidarity from a porter who notices its glinting red. Mayakovsky's evocation of a different world has fallen out of tune with the duet of slogans singing of 'the rejuvenation of the great Chinese nation' and 'Make America Great Again'. While the Chinese Communist Party competes with the United States for the execrable title of global hegemon, it is the voice of floating worker poets who keep open the promise of a future, even if they themselves no longer believe in it. ■



World Factory

Grass Stage, *Little Society*.
PC: Grass Stage.

Christopher CONNERY

This essay posits a new period designation in reform-era China, the WTO years, from roughly 2005 to 2010, and considers some of the political, intellectual, and cultural developments therein. The primary focus is on the Shanghai-based Grass Stage theatre troupe, and its history of theatre work centred on social investigation and inquiry. The author has been a member of the group since 2010, and uses participant observation to discuss various political and cultural possibilities and impasses during the period in question.

The decade from roughly 2005 to 2015 might one day prove to have been one of those distinctive periods in Chinese social, political, and cultural history—one with clear demarcations marking its before and after, a time of possibilities explored and foreclosed, when other futures could have been imagined. Unlike the 1980s, with its burst of new subjectivities, new politics, new cultural forms, new relationships to the state, and its singularly abrupt ending, the originality and distinctiveness of what I call ‘The WTO Years’ may not have been experienced as such at the time. But today, eight years into the Xi Jinping regime, we can see more clearly what set it apart.

The economic forces that gathered steam after Deng Xiaoping’s ‘Southern Journey’ in 1992 came unthrottled after accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001,

when China's role as world factory was secured, accompanied by an ever more rigid and steadily polarised class structure, inequality, and the exploitation of migrant labour that had also begun in the previous decade. Capitalists and entrepreneurs enjoyed unprecedented influence and prestige. The countermovement was equally distinctive: a steadily growing frequency of better and better organised labour actions, with significant political, intellectual, and social strength behind them. Worker activists, supported by labour NGOs—the latter in more than a few cases supported by factions in local governments and unions—helped forge worker identity and an embryonic class politics. Worker actions continue to this day, albeit in smaller numbers than during the WTO years, but what only a few years ago seemed to be a nascent alliance of leftist intellectuals and students, worker activists, and workerist NGOs has met ramped-up state repression, and passed into quiescence.

Although the WTO years were not marked by the higher-profile intellectual debates that raged through the 1980s and 1990s—alienation, humanism, etc.—there was considerable critical intellectual activity in a number of different camps. The New Left saw its profile rise, not only in China but internationally. It was not a particularly radical left. Aside from fairly eclectic brands of Maoism, and isolated voices on the margins calling for social revolution, most of the more visible academic leftists leaned toward social democracy—their one-time hope and champion Bo Xilai flourished in the middle of the WTO years (for a critique of the left's embrace of Bo Xilai, see Connery 2019a). Liberals and neoliberals outnumbered them in the media and the academy, where they were dominant in many university humanities and social science departments. Unlike the United Kingdom, most of Europe, and the United States, there was considerable intellectual depth on what could be called the 'right'. In the work of Qin Hui and Yu Jianrong, for example, one would find cogent, clear, and socially engaged critiques of state policy, not

the unthinking embrace of the agnotological urges, or of the 'entrepreneurial spirit' that so gripped the many epigones of successology elsewhere in the neoliberal universe.

Both camps were legible through the lens of the state: after all, the liberals were only advocating a better version of what the state continually referred to as the decisive factor—the market—while the leftists argued for greater fidelity to the values of what was still purportedly a workers' state. At least in terms of appeal to independent-minded urbanites and youth, the liberals and neoliberals had the advantage of dissident status: the better world lay in the reduction of state authority. But especially as the WTO years wore on, the leftists could build on nostalgia for a once egalitarian society. By the end of the WTO years, both groups would be in tatters, but that's another story. Nationalism, a state project pursued in earnest beginning with post-Tiananmen patriotic education, and signalled in periodic anti-Japanese demonstrations and in imitative screeds such as the books *China Can Say No* (中国可以说不) or *China is Not Happy* (中国不高兴) reached a symbolic high point with the Beijing Olympics, and though it was ubiquitous during the WTO years, only with Xi Jinping did it become a true ideological dominant.

It was not a decade marked by iconic, universally-referenced cultural production. Sixth Generation filmmakers like Jia Zhangke and Wang Xiaoshuai continued their work into the WTO years, as did the best-known novelists and poets of the reform period. WTO era culture was more diffuse, smaller in scale, more subcultural, more democratic. The feverish fixation on culture that erupted in the 1980s had given way to the new affect of the recently arrived 'cultured youths' (文艺青年), a figure akin to the hipster but more mainstream. A major force shaping the new period was the Internet and digital culture, which came of age at that time. Facebook, Twitter, and Google were widely available as the WTO years began, though not commonly used, but more important were homegrown platforms such

as QQ (2002), Douban (2005), and the many bulletin board systems and chat rooms that sprang up early in the period, joined later by Weibo (2009) and WeChat (2011).

WTO-era Internet culture, as crass and commercial as it was and is elsewhere in the world, also allowed a range of critical voices that were more ephemeral than those in earlier decades, but also more varied. In the WTO years, if you were a Trotskyist, a Hayekian neoliberal, queer, a Maoist nationalist, or a devotee of successology, there was a place on the Internet for you. Han Han, whose career as social critic/iconoclast coincided with the WTO years (he has since focussed on car-racing and commercial film), embodied one end of the era's spirit. But the new digital technologies also lowered the entry bar for socially-engaged experimental film, and most importantly, independent documentary film, perhaps the most significant medium for social criticism during the entire reform period, which flourished during the WTO years. With the end of the Beijing Independent Film Festival in 2014 and the Nanjing-based China Independent Film Festival, which was not held for several years and finally terminated in 2019, that opening too has closed.

People's(?) Theatre

Theatre has played a distinctive role in China throughout its modern history. It was perhaps the major cultural medium during the revolution, in village productions and in filmed adaptations. The Cultural Revolution productions, limited in absolute number but widely and repeatedly performed, shaped sound- and memory-scapes throughout the population. Traditional theatre had never disappeared, and flourished once more after the lifting of Cultural Revolution restrictions on 'feudal' culture. Television would of course drastically erode the popular audience for live performance, as it did elsewhere in the world, but in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou

particularly, 'serious' theatre flourished once again in the 1980s and 1990s, and this included, later in the period, a return of 'social theatre', which in form and in content looked both to earlier Chinese traditions of politically-engaged theatre, as well as to post-war traditions of social theatre in Europe (Brecht and documentary theatre), Latin America (Agosto Boal), and elsewhere in Asia.

The single production that gave to many in reform-era China a sense of the critical possibilities of social theatre was Huang Jisu, Shen Lin, and Zhang Guangtian's 2000 *Che Guevara* (切·格瓦拉) (Liu 2001). *Che Guevara*, a somewhat loosely-connected set of vignettes on the life of Che Guevara, filled with direct and oblique references to pre-revolutionary, revolutionary, and capitalist China, posed questions about the legacies of socialism, authoritarianism, and the transition to capitalism. The play's references to revolution-era forms and rhetoric were simultaneously serious and ironic—an affective combination that would recur in Chinese social theatre—and although critical of contemporary capitalist society, it was less polemical than it was deliberately thought- and question-provoking. Its force was in the questioning, and it proved again the capacity of theatrical space to be a space of dialogism, discussion, and social interrogation.

Shanghai-based theatre troupe Grass Stage (草台班) took its place within the small but discursively and politically important tradition of social theatre. In a series of productions throughout the WTO years, it sought to expand the idea of theatrical space, and strengthen the capacity of social/theatrical/political space to allow for an interrogation of contemporary society and its historical sedimentations, and function as a live, social space for argument, discussion, and exchange. Grass Stage began somewhat fortuitously. Zhao Chuan (b. 1967) had written a critically acclaimed novel, *Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies* (鸳鸯蝴蝶)—the title refers to a fashionable popular literary genre from pre-war Shanghai, the 'Mandarin Duck and Butterfly' school, which

counted among its most prominent authors Zhao Chuan's grandfather Zhao Shaokuang (1892–1953). Zhao's novel, a first-person, loosely-connected chronicle of daily life in Shanghai narrated by a young man recently returned from abroad, was published in 2001 in Taiwan and 2003 in China, and won its author a Taiwanese literary prize and an artist's residency in Taiwan. While in Taiwan, he got to know experimental playwright Wang Molin, as well as Zhong Qiao, a prominent writer and director of social, 'people's' theatre. He wrote his first play there, *The Toilet's Face* (厕所的脸), concerning cross-straits relations. In 2005, the Korean playwright Chang Soik, founding director of the Namoodak Movement Laboratory, invited Zhao to participate in the 2005 Asian Madang Theatre Festival, featuring social and 'people's' theatre from all over Asia. Zhao often tells the story that Chang Soik turned to him after finding very little of the 'people' in productions he saw at the Beijing People's Art Theatre. At the Festival, Zhao Chuan, Liu Yang, Hou Qinghui, Liu Nian, and others—none professionally trained actors or directors—began work on what would become *38th Parallel Still Play* (三八线游戏), and Grass Stage was born (for the best scholarship in any language on Grass Stage, particularly during its first five years, see Ferrari 2020; on the topic see also Ferrari 2012 and Connery 2019b).

Grass Stage takes its name from a style of Qing-dynasty itinerant theatre, performing popular, often religiously-themed productions in villages on makeshift stages often made of straw, hence the name. By choice and by necessity, Grass Stage, like other small, experimental, or social theatre groups in China, operates at the margins of the cultural sphere. The group's lack of official registration means that it cannot perform in most theatres, cannot be reviewed in many official publications, and cannot sell tickets in the normal fashion. These were choices Grass Stage might have made in any case, since one of its aims has been to create and transform social space. The group has performed in factories, schools, community centres, and museums, as well as a few

unofficial or underground theatres. Foremost among the latter was Shanghai's Downstream Garage (下河迷仓) founded in 2004 by theatre aficionado Wang Jingguo, and the venue for hundreds of experimental performances and exhibitions. When it closed in 2014, there was a pervasive sense in Shanghai that the cultural landscape had changed.

Grass Stage occupied a distinctive space within the cultural landscape in Shanghai and beyond. It kept a distance from state and commercial theatre, naturally, and from both commercial and non-commercial 'art' theatre, eschewing the styles of acting, directing, and set-design typical of the drama academies as well as the well-wrought stylisations of avant-garde artistic productions. Grass Stage also largely avoided identification with 'dissident' art and theatre, whose productions, often focussed on censored topics such as the Cultural Revolution or the Great Famine, could easily find financial support from Europe or elsewhere in the West. Grass Stage took no one from the theatre academies—its members were drawn from society at large. The group's weekly meetings consisted of discussion, physical exercises, theatre exercises drawn largely from the Agosto Boal tradition, and improvised or revised small skits. Anyone who came, and kept showing up over the next many months, became a member.

38th Parallel Still Play was followed by *A Madman's Story* (狂人故事), a play that focussed on contemporary consumer society and its discontents and dislocations, with a number of performances in 2006 and 2007. The group's early connections with social and people's theatre groups across Asia, particularly Taiwan, Japan, Hong Kong, and South Korea—ties that continue to this day—resulted in *Lu Xun 2008*, featuring actors and directors from each of those locations in a non-narrative physical-based depiction of the kinds of social degradation portrayed in Lu Xun's story *A Madman's Diary*. It was performed in multiple versions with different casts in China and elsewhere. With the next major work, *The Little Society* (小社会), performed in three

very different versions in 2009, 2010, and 2011, Grass Stage had developed a compositional, rehearsal, and performance practice that it has used ever since, with variations: social investigation done by all members of the group, along with reading and discussion, group composition over many months during the weekly meetings, with the performance version edited, compiled, composed, and shaped by Zhao Chuan.

The various versions of *The Little Society* were products of Grass Stage members' investigation of lives among the poor and precarious, including life stories, language, body practices, and habitus. It was also an interrogation of practices of representation—in the political and aesthetic sense—that link lives across the social and intellectual spectrum. Central to Grass Stage's performances was what Zhao Chuan called the 'post-performance theatre' (演后戏). These were discussions and arguments between the cast and audience, and often lasted longer than the performances themselves. They were invariably heated and passionate, and were the most exciting public participatory events I ever saw in China.

The Struggle for Critical Space

I became a member of the group in 2010, through an irregular process. I had first met Zhao Chuan in the spring through a mutual friend, and I had seen and much enjoyed a performance of *The Little Society* at the Downstream Garage. Members of the group had seen some of the public lectures I had been giving in Shanghai, including a notorious one where the audience erupted in chaos over disagreements about my remarks about the Cultural Revolution, resulting in the abrupt cancellation of the Global 1960s lecture series I had been scheduled to give. I gave another public lecture in Grass Stage's popular lecture

series, a programme known as the Culture Station (文化站), and was getting closer to the group.

Many Grass Stage productions take inspiration from readings of particular texts. Earlier it had been Lu Xun; in *The Little Society* it was the *Communist Manifesto*. Feeling that the actors were not sufficiently connected to the animating spirit of that text—obligatory courses in Marxism in high school and college seem to have as an ulterior motive the deadening of Marxism's appeal to impressionable youth—Zhao Chuan asked me to give the cast a seminar on the book, which I agreed to do. A few days later, he called and said that he was rewriting *The Little Society* with a part in it for me, and asked if I would be willing to join the cast. I replied that although I never had the slightest acting ambition, I felt that the Grass Stage project was less about performance than the creation of critical space, and that this was a commitment we shared. If as a director he could guarantee that I would not shame myself too much in front of an audience, I would do it.

The cast members who had attended my 1960s lectures had pegged me as a revolutionary romantic, someone oblivious to the tragic dimensions and the countless victims of China's revolutions, from the 1940s through the 1970s. My exposition of class struggle in the *Communist Manifesto* seminars had not significantly altered that view—class struggle remains a taboo topic in China. Zhao Chuan, in taking the raw material of individual members' personalities, political positions, and life histories as compositional elements, often likes to make the cast's interpersonal ideological or political tensions an element of the play. My character was a sort of Marxist revenant, who opened the play with multi-lingual recitations of the *Communist Manifesto* while sitting in the audience, and who later, from slightly offstage, read letters interrogating several of the main characters—aspiring or marginalised members of ordinary society—with appeals to socialist ideals and revolutionary principles. My

character's Marxism was more impassioned, heartfelt, and utopian than the Party's version; it was far from bureaucratise. Even then, its distance from the lives and histories of the main characters gave the play a productive tension, and provoked post-performance discussion of singular intensity.

On one national tour, we had two performances in Huaihua, western Hunan. One cast member also taught at the university in Huaihua, and had started a theatre troupe there hoping to alleviate what seemed to him to be an epidemic of depression that had already resulted in several suicides among the faculty. Huaihua was not the normal venue for a Shanghai theatre production, and several members of the civic elite, including one from the Party Office, came to the performance. The Party official criticised our Marxism, saying that we had a faulty understanding of surplus value appropriation. The Party had determined that surplus value appropriation was not exploitation, but a necessary prerequisite for national development. That discussion continued for some time.

Theatre of Social Investigation

In 2011 Grass Stage began an investigation into the theme of work—its existential, political, social, and psychic dimensions—and this eventually grew into *World Factory* (世界工厂), performed from 2014 to 2016. In 2012, Zhao Chuan had gone to Manchester, visiting scenes from its early industrial history and learning about Karl Marx's time there. This proved to be an important catalyst. A vision gradually arose of a work that would reflect on the birth of the world factory and its current incarnation in China. It would also reflect on the global journey of the workers' movement, from the Peterloo massacre to the victory of the Communist Party in China. Grass Stage's

typical focus on the lives and bodies of the socially marginalised remained intact, but this was joined for the first time to a broader and more explicit geopolitical economic context.

Grass Stage often incorporated music into its productions, and for *World Factory*, Zhao Chuan was able to enlist the participation of Xu Duo, one of the founding members of the New Workers' Art Troupe (新工人艺术团), a group of worker activists and musicians based in Picun, a village on the outskirts of Beijing. Xu Duo's music commonly reflected the lives and struggles of migrant labourers, or, as the Picun crowd referred to them, the 'new workers' (新工人). The music was poignant, somewhat reminiscent of Woody Guthrie, albeit with punk edges.

Hovering in and around the play was the recent history of the Foxconn worker suicides that began in 2010 and continued for the next few years, including the 2014 suicide of the worker-poet Xu Lizhi (see Sorace's essay in the present issue). Most had jumped from factory or dormitory roofs, and these falling bodies became a motif in the play. Like many Grass Stage productions, it was a series of connected vignettes—a group of assembly line workers were positioned to one side of the stage, cutting out blue paper dolls (the colour of workers' uniforms), which were used intermittently in the play as emblems of the workers' disposability or interchangeability. Other characters in the play included factory workers, many of whose lines came from workers' printed or recorded testimonies, an industrialist, and a 'left-behind youth' (one of the many millions of young children left behind in villages while their parents worked in the cities). Typical of Grass Stage productions, it was physical theatre too. A common trope was the hand: hands of the assembly line, hands crushed in workplace accidents, hands of connection and disconnection. In one scene, one of the actors purposely wore herself into exhaustion while rapidly jump-roping in place, reciting lines from crushed woman workers who had been driven to despair.



Grass Stage, After-theatre theatre. PC: Grass Stage.

A masked clown—*commedia dell'arte* in the Dario Fo tradition formed one strand of Grass Stage's influence—served as a kind of bourgeois chorus, treating worker suicides with blithe indifference in the play's first scene, and at the end of the play reminding audience members that the products of the factory system—among other things, the factory where the Foxconn suicides took place made iPhones and iPads—were, after all, among our most valued possessions, so we should not get too upset about workers' lives. From her first scene:

Masked Clown: ... How about I act out a scene called 'Healthy and Wealthy in Eight Easy Steps' [note: 康 *kang* 'healthy' and 富 *fu* 'wealthy' are two of the three characters in Foxconn]. Healthy and Wealthy! 8 8 8 8 8, making the leap to wealth!

(This and all the following translations from the play are by Lennet Daigle and Christopher Connery)

One member who had joined Grass Stage during the composition of *World Factory* was nominally a policeman but worked mostly as a psychotherapist and psychotherapist trainer, both professions that at the time had remarkably low barriers to entry. He had a deep commitment to acting, but shared few of Grass Stage members' social concerns, and thus seemed a strange fit in the group. Zhao Chuan, as was his wont, had him play a version of himself, in this case a not very flattering one:

Masked Clown: Professor Lü, welcome. Last time I saw you, you were in pyramid sales. So tell us, in a factory with ten thousand workers, why do some commit suicide while others do not? What kind of person commits suicide?

Psychologist: Well, that's a very good question, and you've come to the right person. In psychology we use the special term 'psychological resilience', which refers to a person's ability to deal with setbacks.



Grass Stage, Assembly line, *World Factory*.
PC: Grass Stage.

Some of the young people who work in factories are raised by loving parents, they are physically healthy, and they have broad knowledge of the world. So when they encounter some difficulty they are able to put it behind them and move on. Other people do not get enough love from their parents, and they're physically and emotionally unwell, so when something bad happens they just can't take it and throw themselves off a building. HaHaHa—

Near the end of the play, a character based on an idealistic environmentalist gives his vision of a reformed economic system, emphasising workers' control, sustainability, shared ownership, etc. The Clown addresses the audience directly:

Masked Clown: Haha, if you do things his way, will you still have iPhones? Will you still have name brands to wear? Will you still be able to play mahjong, watch your

stocks and wait to die? If you listen to him your lives will have to change. Scary isn't it? Is that what you want? Are you scared? Is that what you want?

The play ends with the assembly workers storming off the line, hundreds of the blue paper dolls filling the air above the stage, with the cast dancing to and singing along with Xu Duo's song 'We Quit':

In this world factory, you're nothing but a component

And they're slowly grinding you down,
grinding away your youth

And they want to kick you out

And then you realise, your rage has no
place to go

How do you like being a piece of dust?

How do you like floating in the wind?

How do you like having them above you?

How do you like them babbling?

How do you like the incurable ignorance?

How do you like not caring whether or not
you even exist?
How do you like feeding on illusions?
How do you like living in a dream?
We quit—we quit—we quit!
Wherever there is oppression there is
resistance
'A single spark can start a prairie fire'
The true path is always world changing
Marching boldly forward for the sake of
those who follow ...

Politically, *World Factory* represented a mutation for Grass Stage. On tour with *The Little Society*, Zhao Chuan once said to me that he was glad that the play appealed to liberals and leftists alike. He sought a 'questioning' theatre, rather than one of straightforward advocacy: the plays were to open a conversation that would hopefully last well beyond the performance. *The Little Society* demanded that viewers confront the actuality of social class, and examine their relationship to the precarious and the marginal. But it avoided coming down firmly on the side of the more explicit political directions outlined by my character. I ended up seeing this as a strength. *World Factory* was more firmly on the side of the workers and more resolutely anti-systemic.

Grass Stage had always pushed against the political detachment of the 'cultured youths', but in *World Factory* the stakes—and the discomfort—were higher. Not all viewers welcomed that. The post-performance discussions were heated and intense. On a few occasions, fights broke out among the audience. There were those who identified with the masked clown's position—I like my things, and if this is the labour regime necessary for me to get them, that's fine. I was surprised by their willingness to air those views, although they were sometimes shouted out of the performance space. Audiences got involved, and they appreciated that, but they were not reticent in their critiques. One academic upbraided the director and cast for the finale

song: 'Are you really advocating a mass strike? Don't you think it might be irresponsible to goad people on to actions that could get them killed?'

Impasses

The performances at the OCAT Art Terminal in Shenzhen 21 and 22 November 2014 were transformative for Grass Stage. My role there was an odd one as well. In addition to the two performances, there were to be talks on the play by Wang Hui (see his essay in the present issue), Pun Ngai, and other luminaries. After helping organise and plan the series of events, I belatedly realised that like many privately-sponsored art spaces that have opened in China in the last decade or so, the venue was founded by a real estate corporation, in this case the Huaqiao Company, one of China's biggest real estate firms. The Huaqiao company had been behind a development on East Lake in Wuhan to which a broad spectrum of Wuhan activists—students, faculty, artists, plus key members of the Wuhan anarcho-punk community—had organised a popular opposition movement. I was close to many of them and had participated in some of their activities. I told Zhao Chuan I could not in good conscience participate in an activity that Huaqiao sponsored. It was a painful exchange, but I agreed to go to Shenzhen anyway and to speak at a forum, provided I could mention why I was not on stage (it is still a matter of debate whether or not it was my criticism of the Huaqiao company that resulted in the artistic director's dismissal shortly thereafter).

The OCAT budget for the event was quite generous. Importantly, the staff agreed to our request to have factory workers at the performances, and each night several busloads of workers—from Foxconn and elsewhere—were delivered to the theatre. In the post-performance discussions, several workers

shared stories about the intersections between their lives and what they had seen on stage. During one post-performance discussion, a graduate student raised the question of representation: was it really politically fine to have a group of Shanghai artists representing assembly-line workers? Shouldn't you be more forthcoming about the inherent class contradictions? She was expecting some postmodern meta-reflection on the politics of representation, and we were prepared to respond. But a young woman worker immediately rose to our defense, speaking about how proud she felt when she saw the large posters in the Shenzhen metro stations advertising the event, when she saw that people cared about who she was and what she did.

While in Shenzhen in late 2014, the group spent considerable time among worker activists and NGOs from all over the Pearl River Delta, mostly at the Foxconn site. We saw a level of political awareness and commitment that was hard to find in Shanghai, and several of us were impressed and inspired by the possibilities that this opened up. Some Grass Stage members, their political convictions clarifying and deepening, involved themselves more and more with the workers scene over the next few years. Others, not happy with what seemed to be a change in the group's political and aesthetic direction, grew more and more distant, and a few eventually left the group.

The Fall 2016 tour of *World Factory* included performances in Hangzhou, Chongqing, Sichuan, Guangdong, Shenzhen, Hong Kong, and Shanghai. For most of those performances, the group was joined by a Foxconn worker who was interested in organising a theatre troupe with other Foxconn workers. His presence gave the post-performance discussions a distinctive character. When an audience member commented—and this happened more frequently than one might imagine—that assembly-line workers deserved their fate because they had not studied hard enough in school, this worker would calmly and clearly

speak of the Dickensian sequence of events—family financial trouble, near imprisonment in and then escape from a rural social-marketing scheme—that led him to the line. It stopped many arguments.

Several members of Grass Stage became deeply committed to development of workers' theatre, and spent considerable time in Shenzhen doing workshops, training sessions, rehearsals, and facilitating group compositions. It was difficult work, since worker/actors' ability to work on the theatrical pieces was affected by their work schedules. But eventually the North Gate Theatre Troupe was formed, found enough time to rehearse, and eventually won an award for its production 'Our Story' (我们的故事). I saw a performance in Shanghai and it was very moving, not simple testimonial, but also meta-reflective of the transformation of the workers' stories into art. Given the short rehearsal, I was also very impressed at the workers' ability to get beyond the self-conscious 'acting' phase of the performance trajectory and return to the bodily, vocal, and affective character of their real lives. As I watched, I was mentally making plans to arrange for a US tour if they were willing. I imagined US audiences would rush to a performance opening onto the real lives and bodies of those who had spent years on the line, making their iPhones and iPads.

This could have been a beginning, or at least a happy ending, but it was not. The crackdown on labour activism and on cross-class activist alliances that intensified over 2018–19 took the Bei Men theatre troupe down with it. Any activity that had a hint of worker activism became dangerous. *The World Factory* would not be performed again, at least for a while. The WTO years were over, and as they ended, so did a phase of Grass Stage's existence. Whither Grass Stage? Whither China? Now more than ever, it is difficult to see. ■



From Rebellion to Erasure

The Rise and Fall of Urban Folk Rocker Li Zhi

Jingyi WANG (Veronica)

Folk rock (民谣) has long been a popular subculture in contemporary China, historically playing a 'rebellious' spiritual role. This essay profiles folk-rock singer Li Zhi, who achieved widespread popularity before being banned for unknown reasons in April 2019. The case of Li Zhi showcases how the Party-state has been renegotiating its cultural legitimacy by coopting grassroots art and absorbing potentially subversive cultural elements into its own political 'spectacle'.

Billboard for the prominent Cactus music festival that took place in Chengdu during July 2019 after the ban on Li Zhi. His name was added in handwriting by participants to 'remember' him.
PC: Shelly Yiran Shi.

In the summer of 2019, underground rock subculture became an overnight sensation in China through a talent show called 'Summer of Bands' (乐队的夏天). What is notable about this resurgence is the role that the Party-state played in it. The quest of the Chinese authorities for soft power and cultural legitimacy, aimed at '[winning] the hearts and minds of the vast majority' (Zhao 2013, 27), resulted in a state-sponsored project of 'building cultural confidence' (建立文化自信) that adopted the strategy of mobilising underground culture through media and market exposure.

Unfortunately, it is still too early to celebrate the recognition of subculture in China. Although President Xi's 'cultural confidence' doctrine, proposed in 2012, marked an intensified connection between the political mobilisation of folk culture and grassroots creative agency, this relationship remains fraught with challenges and contradictions. This essay aims to showcase how the Party-state is renegotiating its cultural legitimacy by coopting grassroots art and absorbing potentially subversive cultural elements into its own political 'spectacle' (Debord 2005). However, cooptation also casts a long shadow of exclusion, as demonstrated in the fate of the folk-singer Li Zhi, who was suddenly banned from performing in April 2019 after his rise to stardom. This essay investigates the boundaries of cooptation in the Xi era by shedding light on increasingly tighter cultural control in the process of China's ongoing transition from the 'Harmonious Society' (和谐社会) of the Hu and Wen era (2003–13) to the 'Chinese Dream' (中国梦) of the current administration.

China's Political 'Spectacle'

To better understand the interwoven relationship between political authority and the culture industry in post-reform China, this essay draws on the concept of 'spectacle' that Debord proposed in 1967, when he critically observed that 'everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation' (Debord 2005, 7). Another key element of Debord's analysis is that the spectacle is almost immune to subversion: to critique it or to attempt to inject another substance into it will always lead to the trivialisation, sterilisation, and ultimately commercialisation of radical ideas. Though some scholars have been worrying about the visual-centred consumerist spectacle being ever-prevalent in China (Wu 2020), increasingly severe cultural governance

and censorship has once again re-confirmed the primacy of politics in China's society. In such a society, the 'representation' of politics outweighs the 'reality' of politics.

While China's 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' is 'conceptually based on the continuities and discontinuities between [socialist traditions and neoliberal reform (Lin 2006, 1), the political spectacle in China is not reducible to a critique of capitalism. Xi's ubiquitous 'Chinese Dream' slogan and cultural retreat to Confucianism constitutes an overwhelmingly pervasive 'political spectacle' in which the 'dream' invokes ambiguity and nostalgia for ancient times (Chai and Chai 2013, 95) and is capacious and pliable enough to absorb other critical discourses. The emerging 'political spectacle' created by Xi's power has moved from mostly coexisting with capitalism to essentially overriding capitalism, usurping its place as the hegemonic form of the spectacle itself.

Folk Rock in China and Li Zhi

Born in 1978, Li Zhi is an amateur artist who never received proper musical training. After obtaining his first guitar and being exposed to the music of Luo Dayou and Pink Floyd, he quit studying automation control at university to pursue a music career in 1999—a rather common career trajectory for the current generation of Chinese subcultural musicians. An ethnographic study of these musicians indicates that amateur players were mostly attracted to rock because it is 'straightforward and simple' (Xiao, 2015, p. 81); more importantly, a skinhead player in the ethnography suggested in an interview that 'what we sang about was our true lives while foreign lyrics were just lyrics' (Xiao 2015, 93). Maybe it is because of this longing for singing about one's own true life, contemporary musicians in China are not satisfied by just

performing ‘foreign lyrics’ as when rock first came to China, and some Chinese folk-rock songs make deliberate attempts to criticise contemporary social issues.

For example, the now-banned ‘Chinese Kids’ (中国孩子, 2007) by Zhou Yunpeng directly condemned several, well-known horrifying scandals involving the death of children. ‘Don’t be a kid in Karamay, where the fire burns your skin, breaking [your] mother’s heart / Don’t be a kid in the town of Shalan, where it’s too dark in the water, you can’t go to sleep ...’ In each line, the song directly speaks to unforgotten tragedies, be it the death of 288 school children in a theatre fire in Karamay, Xinjiang province, in 1994, when pupils were told to ‘let the leaders walk out first’, or a flash flood that hit Shalan, Heilongjiang province in 2005 (for the full interpretation of the song, see de Kloet 2010, 81). Yet while Zhou Yunpeng is still active in the mainland folk-rock scene, Li Zhi, who released songs such as ‘The Square’ (广场) and ‘People Don’t Need Freedom’ (人民不需要自由)—both alluding to the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989—has now been erased from the music market altogether. These arbitrary boundaries of censorship reflect decentralised local governance as instruments of the central government administrative strategy of control (Chung 2015, 38). While criticism levelled at local governments is tolerated and even sometimes addressed to exhibit the responsiveness of the central government, parody of the legitimacy of the central authority has become unacceptable in Xi’s political spectacle.

Throughout his career, Li Zhi has always claimed to be a ‘small town youth’ (小镇青年). This claim evokes a very common experience of ‘compressed modernity’ (Chang 2010) and growing up amid the unprecedented speed and unevenness of urbanisation. As a result, his songs resonate with people composing a loose and fluid subculture of ‘networks of people who come to share the meaning of specific ideas, material objects, and practices through interaction’ (Williams 2011, 39). Li Zhi’s music,

although perhaps unassuming upon first listen, gives form to the power inequalities and regional ‘uneven modernity’ (Gong 2011) that define contemporary China.

Songs of Place

Li Zhi’s 2014 album *1701* critically reflected on Chinese social phenomena caused, but also forgotten, by its neoliberal developmentalism, one of which being the nostalgia for ‘place’. The song ‘Hot River’ (热河), titled after the name of a street in Nanjing, opens with the line ‘Hot River Street is just like Jintan township in the 1980s’, comparing the street to his birthplace in Jiangsu province, once a small settlement which has now become a district of the prefecture-level city Changzhou with a population of 560,000 residents. Whereas this figure seems large, it is much less than the average population of four million characteristic of Chinese prefecture-level cities, and further pales in comparison to megacities like Beijing or Shanghai. These numbers further cement the ‘small town youth’ identity that Li Zhi has always associated himself with; in 2009, 71 percent of the population lived in these ‘small towns’ (World Bank 2012, 10), which are administratively classified as ‘urban’ along with metropolitan centres.

Consequently, Li Zhi’s memory of place, like many millions of Chinese ‘small town youth’, is vastly different from the memories of inhabitants residing in metropolitan cities. Li described his formative years in a television interview as challenging: ‘During the early 1990s in my small town, my middle school was extremely chaotic ... My parents were illiterate or semi-illiterate, the whole town did not have any extracurricular books ...’ (Jiafang 2015). In this interview he further confirms that his experience is a fairly common situation among other ‘small town youth’ who are his fans. Thus, it cannot be assumed that a person who was born and raised in these ‘small urban towns’,

albeit formally holding an ‘urban’ *hukou*, shares the living experiences and cultural identity of residents in first-tier cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, or Shenzhen.

Well aware of this shared ‘site of memory’ of the ‘small town youth’, Li Zhi is a master of ‘encoding’ this memory into music, as evidenced by the lyrics of ‘Hot River’:

‘On Rehe Street is / A barber shop that
has been open for many years / No matter
what hairstyle you want / You only need to
pay five yuan / The boss and her younger
sister sit on the chairs / Facing the mirror
without saying a word / Their hometown
is behind them / On the shore, in Anhui,
Quanjiao

Beside the monument there is a shabby
cinema / Walk five hundred meters north
to Nanjing West train station / There are
out-of-towners everyday / Getting lost
between straight and curved lines / Out
of breath, full of tears / Running, tripping,
running ...
I have been in the city for 896 days / Rehe
Street always has the same look ...’

These verse-like lyrics carefully portray Hot River Street as an urban ghetto or village for the migrant community. As a small-town migrant in Nanjing himself, this street is probably where Li Zhi spent 896 days with many others like him. Migration in China has become a ‘rite of passage for young people’, with the ‘culture of migration’ perpetuating itself among young children as they grow up with the expectation that migration is the endorsed goal, either for employment opportunities or for university education (Murphy 2002, 21). Li Zhi initially went to Nanjing for university, describing himself as ‘lucky’ while many of his other classmates just ‘went with the flow and stopped studying’ (Jiafang 2015). The lines ‘The boss and her young sister sit on the chairs ... / Their hometown is behind them / On the shore, in Anhui, Quanjiao’ explicitly mention the

experience of migration that people from small towns shared; despite their hometowns being scattered across China, they have undergone a generation of development together with the country. Moreover, the lyrics ‘out of breath and full of tears / Running, tripping, running’ are a vivid portrayal of these migrants’ ‘practice of everyday life’ (de Certeau and Rendall 1984).

From ‘Rebellious Spectacle’ to ‘Erased Noise’

Many scholars have highlighted the importance of live performance as a cultural production medium. The live experience ‘emphasises reality, naked textures and bearing witness’ (Dai Jinhua, quoted in Inwood 2014, 15), and the requirement of physical presence heightens both the fluidity and the communicative potentiality in a show, creating ‘a kind of aura, a coming together of breaths, sights, and sounds with which flat-screen arts cannot compare’ (Huang Zhenlin, quoted in Inwood 2014, 16). Li Zhi is probably well aware of the mobilising nature of live events, and in 2017 his team announced plans for a nationwide tour titled 334 that would have taken place over the following 12 years. The initiative was so named for the goal of travelling to and performing at all of the 334 prefecture-level cities of China—most of them fourth- and fifth-tier ‘small towns’ unknown to the general public—after having performed at virtually all economically advanced cities.

Ever since Deng Xiaoping famously uttered ‘let some people get rich first’ during his South China Tour in the 1990s, China’s dazzling economic developments have attracted global attention to its glamorous cities. For instance, Beijing is the site for practicing national identity and Shanghai the object of global consumerism (Visser 2010). On the contrary, smaller Chinese cities that may not have achieved global status

are examined and presented by some artists as a ‘world without a future’, as in the films of Jia Zhangke (Bordeleau 2010). These ‘small towns’ often only appear as the ‘hometown’ of the hundreds of millions of peasant workers floating and following the ‘blind flow’ (盲流) of migration, mere sites of departure, places to be escaped from. As Yi-Fu Tuan, a Chinese-American geographer who is known as the ‘father’ of humanist geography, highlighted: a space transforms into a meaningful ‘place’ by ‘spatial feelings and ideas in the stream of experience’ (Tuan 1979, 388), and a place is ‘defined by how bodies come to make meaning out of, form attachments to and navigate within spatial environments’ (Tuan, in Xiao 2018, 39–40). Per his logic, we can say that these Chinese ‘small towns’ targeted by Li Zhi have been inadvertently reduced to ‘non-places’ or non-meaningful places, entangled between globalised cities and the nostalgically imagined agricultural rural, impotent in providing attachable cultural images for their people. By becoming administratively classified as ‘cities’, these towns have given up agricultural land and adopted ‘speculative urbanisation’ (Shin 2016), resulting in them being squeezed out of the Chinese dichotomy of spatial symbols.

In aiming for the ‘decentralising’ of his critical folk rock to these ‘neglected’ small towns, Li Zhi’s 334 touring project carries two key implications that can be interpreted as rebellion against the Chinese ‘political spectacle’. Firstly, the power of ‘live performance discourse’ is wielded as ‘an expression of resistance against the perceived discursive power (*huayuquan*)—or gatekeeping authority’ (Inwood 2014, 18) that is delegated to local levels of government. Although scholars have argued that globalised capital, neoliberal desires, and transnational modernity are constantly intertwined and complementary with state authorities in big cities (for example, see de Kloet & Scheen 2013; Lu 2001 and 2007; Meng 2018), the control of discursive power in local government areas across China is subject to more state intervention (Chung 2015). Explaining his reasons for embarking on

the 334 tour at his show in Shandong, Li Zhi remarked: ‘We hope we can go to these more remote, so-called third- and fourth-tier cities, play there, and give you guys some courage. [We want to] maintain the locality of the “venue”, because for underground music, the venue is number one; without the locality of the venue, how can you see this kind of show here?’ (Three Three Four Project 2017). If immersing themselves in rock music provides urban youth in the cultural North of Beijing with ‘cosmopolitan poses’ and ‘the potential to realise social and political change’ (de Kloet 2010, 15 and 202), then what Li Zhi is doing is bringing such flexible subjectivities down to the ‘local China’ comprised of these small towns that are yet to catch up with global trends, a choice that to a certain extent poses a challenge to the highly centralised ‘political spectacle’. Indeed, his exclusion of ‘directly-administered municipalities’ during his tour may well be a deliberate attempt to ‘decentralise’ or even ‘alter’ the cultural hegemony of state endorsement.

Yet, considering how both local markets and local authorities have displayed a striking ability to coopt independent artists, the ban on Li Zhi sent a warning signal about the boundaries between state and market, a reminder of the power relations between spontaneous folk culture and the ‘political spectacle’. This is not to suggest that the widely conceptualised cooptation strategies of commodification and the institutionalisation of folk culture, both aimed at depoliticising society, have been rendered void. Instead, I suggest that the contemporary Chinese cultural scene should be reevaluated from the perspective of the decoding and reproduction processes enacted by the audience in this rapidly changing era. At an afterparty following Li Zhi’s show in Jinan, Shandong province, the head of the Shandong 334 fan group said:

‘In Jinan, this fourth-tier city, there are no live music performances nor rock music. Li Zhi said today that for young people living in a less-developed city, other than eating,

drinking, and playing *mah-jong*, I hope there are more shows like this in Jinling' (Three Three Four Project 2018).

Another fan from a rural area added:

'I believe this world will be better. My family is from a rural village ... All the money used to buy my show ticket and transport fees, I earned all by myself ... When Li Zhi was performing inside, I was drinking by the door. Just by the door, that's where my utopia is; just by the door of Li Zhi's live performance, that's where my utopia is ...' (Three Three Four Project 2018).

When an off-screen voice asked 'So do you really believe that performing travelling shows like he is doing, city by city, would change the local youth?', all the fans answered 'Yes, it will definitely make changes', and began singing Li Zhi's signature song 'Has Man a Future' (这个世界会好吗). Following the rural fan's passionate pursuit of his 'utopia', this very touching scene seems to affirm Chinese rock star Cui Jian's assertion that 'rock is an ideology, not a set musical form' (Jones 1992, 115).

whose performances enacted 'a collective ritual of resistance' (Wasserstrom and Perry 1992, 152).

Comparing Li Zhi's fan club with Cui Jian's pre-1989 audience reveals a corresponding function of constructing a 'utopia' from the artists' music, or rather an 'ideology' for their supporters. Whereas listeners of Cui Jian's music were mostly college students and urban workers, the demographics of Li Zhi fans are slightly more complex. Not only have young migrants to urban areas been mobilised by his songs of desire and place, more urban subjects have also become attracted to this underground idol through the mass commercialisation and cooptation of his music. Given that grassroots resistance of all forms has become a rising problem for local governance across China (Zhang and Lee 2019), there is reason to believe that with the local inroads of the 334 project, the fear of the 'change' that Li Zhi's ideology struggled to promote led to his sudden erasure from the scene. ■

A New Utopia

When investigating Chinese popular music of the 2000s, de Kloet wrote: 'We are living in a world characterised by an absence of a utopia outside, it becomes all the more urgent to think through the political and social possibilities emerging from within the systems in which we are living' (de Kloet 2010, 202). The reception of Li Zhi's music marks the emergence of a 'utopia' from under the hegemonic cultural system and the 'political spectacle'—at least from the perspective of those small town youth whose subjectivities are desperate for change. Rock music had once 'reached and influenced the political behaviour of a far larger audience' before and during the student movements of 1989, with Cui Jian serving as a symbolic figure

The background of the entire page is an abstract, textured composition. It features a mix of deep blue, teal, and brownish-red hues, with a mottled, almost marbled appearance. The textures vary from smooth to highly irregular and grainy, giving it a sense of depth and complexity.

FORUM

Enigmas of Chinese Capital

Ruben GONZALEZ-VICENTE
Aaron HALEGUA
Juliet LU
Chris SMITH
Yu ZHENG



FORUM

Enigmas of Chinese Capital

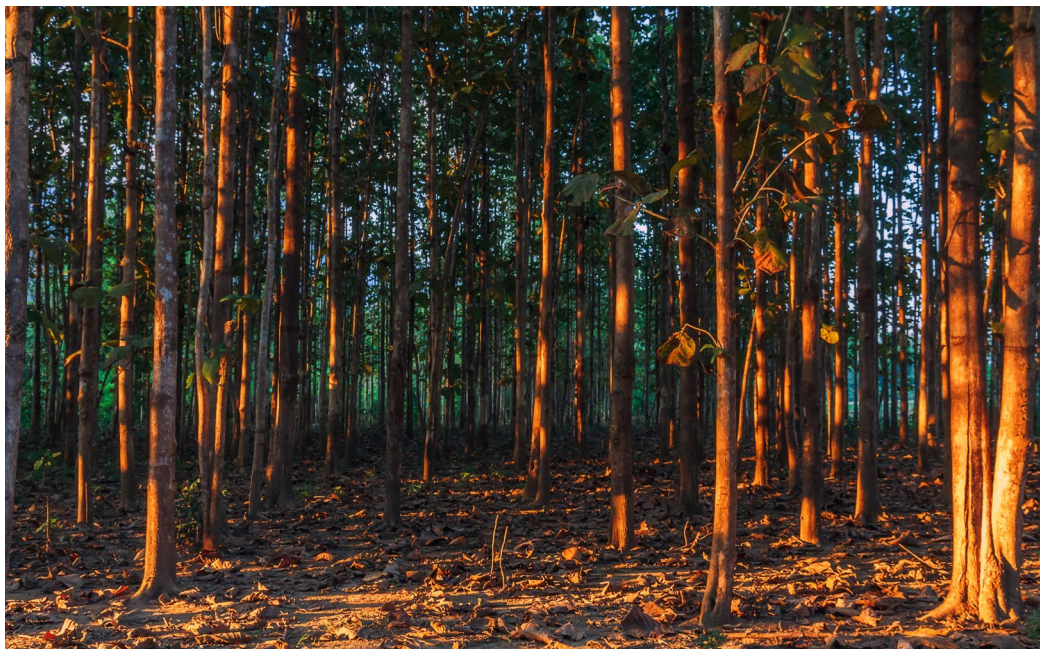
In 2017, renowned sociologist Ching Kwan Lee published *The Specter of Global China: Politics, Labor, and Foreign Investment in Africa*, a groundbreaking monograph in which she drew on six years of in-depth fieldwork in Zambia to ask a new set of questions on the role of Chinese capital abroad.

Through a sustained comparison between Chinese state capital and global private capital in Zambia's copper and construction sectors, Lee found that these two types have divergent imperatives of accumulation, driving them to run different regimes of production, which in turn were enabled by different ethos of management. Specifically, Chinese state capital is characterised by a logic of encompassing accumulation—i.e. profit making, extending China's political and diplomatic influence, and gaining source access to strategic minerals—as opposed to global private capital's profit maximisation. Whereas Chinese state capital runs a production-driven regime of labour exploitation, global private capital operated a finance-driven regime of labour exclusion and casualisation. Whereas collective asceticism

has animated the Chinese managerial ethos, individualistic careerism has defined that of its global private counterparts. Counterintuitively, Chinese state capital, rather than being more dominant and influential, has made more compromises to accommodate Zambian state and labour demands than global private capital has.

For this issue, we asked a group of scholars and practitioners to engage with her arguments from the perspective of their respective research in different areas of the world. In the following essays, they offer views from contexts as different as Laos, Saipan, the Caribbean, and Europe.

Ivan Franceschini
Nicholas Loubere



Rubber Trees in Vang
Vieng, Laos.
PC: Roman Korzh.

Strategic Resources and Chinese State Capital

A View from Laos

Juliet LU

The claim at the heart of Ching Kwan Lee's *The Specter of Global China* (2017) is that Chinese state capital differs from other forms of global private capital. But Lee acknowledges that 'state capital' is a complicated category—not all state-owned enterprises share similar connections to the state, and many private companies have robust ties to state support and influence. She is careful to show that not all state-linked firms share the 'logic of encompassing accumulation' (the pursuit of goals beyond profit, such as other

measures of growth, employment creation, maintenance of social stability, etc.) that sets Chinese state capital apart from other types of investment. In response to the question at the heart of her book—'Is Chinese state capital a different kind of capital?'—Lee concludes that, 'yes, it can be *made* different under certain conditions' (2017, 28) but it is not always so.

One pivotal condition determining whether a Chinese company operates differently from global private capital is whether they aim to secure access to a 'strategic' (战略物资)

resource. Lee shows that Chinese construction firms in Zambia, which include state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and firms with state-backed concessional loans, operate as any other construction firm would; in essence, they share the ‘single-minded pursuit of profit maximization’ (2017, 28) typical of all forms of global private capital regardless of their varied links to the Chinese state. The Chinese copper mining firm NFCA, in contrast, aims not only to pursue profits but also to accrue political capital and secure access to copper, which China considers to be a strategic resource. Lee presents a set of ‘market-defying corporate decisions by the Chinese state mine’ (2017, 29) as evidence of its logic of encompassing accumulation—decisions which show that the company deprioritises profit maximisation in order to secure steady access to copper and garner political capital with the Zambian state. This makes Chinese state capital more flexible and responsive to host country state and society’s demands.

In this essay, I aim to extend Lee’s work by examining the history of the Chinese state’s commitment to securing access to resources it deems strategic, and the ways in which this history structures firm-level approaches to investing in rubber, another strategic resource. Lee explains that the Zambian state treats copper as a strategic sector because it remains ‘the linchpin of the economy and the main source (70 per cent) of foreign earnings’ (2017, 24), but why copper is considered so important to the Chinese state is left less explored. Here, I examine the history behind the Chinese state’s promotion and protection of certain sectors as strategic and reflect on how this has resulted in a complex set of contradictions as China goes global. This history is especially important to understanding my research on Chinese investments in rubber plantations in northern Laos. I conclude that, in order to understand how the designation of a resource as strategic changes the behaviour of firms and the structure of a sector, we must ask: strategic in what sense, and strategic for whom?

The Mantra of Self-reliance

The designation of certain sectors and resources as strategic is not unique to China, but it has been a pillar of the Chinese Communist Party’s approach to economic development. The Chinese state has designated certain resources as strategic since the country’s founding, and economic self-reliance (自力更生) was the organising objective around strategic resources (Yang 2019). In this essay, I trace the evolution of Chinese approaches to self-reliance and strategic resources in order to show that neither is a stable or apolitical category. Rather, both terms evolved along with changes in China’s political economy and are used by the state and other actors to achieve different strategic ends. They strengthen whoever can attach their own interests to them, resulting in the construction of complex networks of power and connections around commodities like rubber and copper.

Self-reliance was initially a campaign slogan used by Mao Zedong to boost morale during wartime scarcity in the 1940s. After the Sino-Soviet Split in the 1960s, as the country weaned itself off Soviet support, self-reliance became a nationalistic rallying cry. Chinese economic reliance on the Soviet Union was a result of its own underdevelopment as well as extensive trade embargoes—including restrictions on copper and rubber imports—which Western nations placed on China as a result of its involvement in the Korean War (Cain 1995; Tisdell 2013). China’s emphasis on self-reliance was not unusual for the time; it ran parallel to a global emphasis in development economics on import-substitution industrialisation for developing countries. The rise of neoliberal economics since the 1980s has swept away allegiances to this approach in most countries, but China’s acute economic isolation during its formative period engrained self-reliance deeply in Chinese ideals of patriotism, geopolitical independence, and state power—and the rhetoric of self-reliance is now experiencing a renaissance in the context of the US-China trade war (Thomas 2019).

Although the reform era (starting in 1978) marked a gradual move away from the isolationism of the Mao era and towards economic openness and global trade, China's leaders retained their commitment to self-reliance under a doctrine of 'taking self-reliance as the principal means and external assistance as a subsidiary' (Chen 1992, 60; see also Yang 2019). Reforms were done selectively, with a focus on strengthening domestic industry and fuelling economic growth but with carefully set limitations on what sectors were privatised. Self-reliance, and the state support necessary to maintain it, thus was not completely abandoned but instead became something reserved for sectors providing resources and services vaguely identified by the state as important but scarce, thus strategic. Even since China joined the World Trade Organisation in 2001 and increased its pursuit of global integration and growth-oriented planning, scholars have argued that the country's leaders remain committed to self-reliance, in an approach characterised as 'selective and strategic integration that bends globalization to China's long-term nation-building goals' rather than an unfettered capitulation to global capitalism (Kerr 2007, 78).

As China's economy becomes increasingly intertwined with the rest of the world, self-reliance in strategic sectors creates internal contradictions between parts of the economy which have been marketised and those which remain supported by the state—especially as those parts are increasingly integrated with each other and the larger global economy. For example, the continued protection of the domestic rubber sector directly contradicts efforts over the last two decades to establish and expand domestic tire and automobile manufacturing. The state levies a hefty 37 percent tariff on natural rubber imports to protect domestic producers and keep them from shifting out of this strategic crop (interview, Kunming, August 2018). Protective tariffs serve as a lifeline without which domestic rubber cultivation would collapse, but they also drive up input prices for tire manufacturers, who

have called on the state to lower rubber tariffs for decades to no avail (Reuters 2003; Patton 2015). China consumes 41 percent of globally traded rubber, most of which is used by its tire manufacturers. Its demand for rubber has risen rapidly in the last few decades, driven by a growing domestic automobile manufacturing industry. The Chinese state also worked hard in the early 2000s to attract the top global tire companies, offering them a range of incentives to establish manufacturing operations in China, while also investing state support into upgrading domestic tire manufacturing operations (interview, Beijing, December 2016). The practice of protecting domestic rubber—still trumpeted today as strategic to national security—at the cost of having to support the tire sector is an economic contradiction which only deepens as China's economy becomes more globally integrated.

I draw on this example to suggest that the designation of resources as strategic is primarily political. It establishes a certain discourse around that resource—a discourse constructed of powerful narratives of the threat of resource insecurity to Chinese political preservation and independence. The persistence of the mantra of self-reliance despite China's growing global integration and the economic contradictions it poses can be understood, in part, because it justifies continued state interventions into parts of the economic sphere despite a push to marketise the rest (Kerr 2007; Lieberthal 1995; Thomas 2019). It portrays state protection of, and intervention in, strategic sectors as a matter not simply of economic strategy—in many cases, such as the 'market-defying corporate decisions' Lee describes, self-reliance is not economically logical but is instead upheld as a matter of national security, social stability, and the preservation of China's political independence. My interest, therefore, is in the designation of rubber as 'strategic' and how this designation empowers any actors who can attach their own economic interests to it.

How Is Rubber Strategic, and for Whom?

Rubber has long been considered strategic by the Chinese state, and domestic rubber producers enjoy a range of forms of state support, trade protections, and market advantages as a result. But rubber is also important in ways that differ from copper—not only as an indispensable raw material but also as a mechanism for extending state territorial control and economic development in the borderlands. A broad constellation of actors benefit from evoking rubber as strategic, ranging from central state leaders in Beijing to Yunnan provincial authorities, from Lao state actors at different levels to Chinese firms (both state and private) investing in rubber in Laos.

Rubber is the primary input for high-quality tires and the belts and tubes that run most machinery, which makes it pivotal to industrial activity, transportation, and military operations. It was first designated a strategic resource in China in 1951, in response to a trade embargo established by Western countries (initiated and enforced by the United States) which cut off Chinese imports of key industrial materials, including both rubber and copper. The embargo seriously threatened China's ability to import tires, which at that point were primarily used by the military (Cain 1995, 49). That year, the central government approved the 'Decision on Cultivating Rubber Trees' and in 1952 established a plan and allocated state resources to develop 8 million mu (533,333 hectares) of rubber plantations (Sturgeon and Menzies 2006, 24). Initially, then, the pursuit of self-sufficiency in rubber was an economically-rational response to scarcity and a strategic (military) need.

Through the next two decades, rubber also evolved into a pivotal territory-securing device for the country's sensitive southwestern borderlands. A tropical crop previously cultivated primarily in Southeast Asia and South America, rubber could only be grown in a few peripheral provinces in China: Hainan,

Guangxi, and Yunnan. It was promoted throughout the 1950s through the state farms of those three provinces, which evolved out of borderland military units (similar to Xinjiang's *bingtuan* 兵团). As state farm rubber plantations expanded throughout Yunnan, they enclosed upland minorities' fallow forests and converted them into monoculture rubber, driving a dramatic rise in the province's demand for labour to establish and manage the new plantations. Yunnan State Farms (云南农垦集团) plantations became key sites for drawing Han migrants, including a huge number of 'sent-down' youth (知青), into these ethnic minority-dominated regions, and for integrating the borderlands into the national economy (Hille 2013; Sturgeon and Menzies 2006). Today, rubber is still glorified as the crop that tamed the borderlands, pulled millions out of poverty, and transformed the tropical jungles of Xishuangbanna into productive, legible plantation rows.

Rubber continues to be recognised as strategic by the State Reserve Bureau and to be protected as such. In 2007, the State Council issued the 'Opinion on Promoting the Development of China's Natural Rubber Industry', which reemphasised Beijing's view of natural rubber as 'an important strategic material and industrial raw material'. It also provided guiding ideology and principles for the expansion of China's rubber industry through investment abroad. As such, import tariffs continue to insulate domestic rubber farmers from global competition and price fluctuations, and there are stringent restrictions on the conversion of domestic rubber plantations into other cash crops. Just like the CEO of the NFCA mining company in Lee's study who declares that 'one day, if there was an embargo, then Chinese companies would of course sell only to China' (2017, 34), people invested in the Yunnan rubber sector cite state protections as justified by the threat of future embargos. 'Rubber trees are our country's strategic resource' one state farms branch leader told me, and while 'right now all is quite peaceful', he asserted that the state would preserve China's

rubber plantations in case of war (interview, Xishuangbanna, October 2017). The long history of rubber's promotion and protection has made the sector especially important to the province's development and many parts of the provincial economy are structured around rubber.

Each of these ways in which rubber is understood as strategic has, in turn, shaped Chinese rubber investment in Laos and is drawn upon to justify a number of interventions by different actors in the country. In order to encourage the Lao government to facilitate Chinese rubber investments as a form of development cooperation, Chinese diplomats visiting Laos in the early 2000s repeatedly touted rubber's instrumentality in developing and integrating the Yunnan borderlands. In 2004, China's then Deputy Prime Minister Wu Yi signed an agreement with the Lao central government for Yunnan State Farms to establish a target of 2.5 million mu of rubber (166,666 hectares) (Shi 2008), which catalysed a wave of Chinese investment into the Lao rubber sector. Lao state officials themselves also actively took up this portrayal of rubber as strategic, in part because it fit state goals of bringing infrastructure to remote border regions, eradicating opium and shifting cultivation, and establishing 70 percent forest cover across the country by 2020 (Lu 2017). In this sense, discourses of rubber as a tool for the state-driven transformation of traditional landscapes and a way of securing state territorial control generated synergies between the Lao and Chinese central states' promotion of rubber.

An Alternative to Opium Cultivation

Rubber was also promoted as an alternative to opium cultivation, a discourse that has profoundly shaped the structure of the Lao rubber sector and the 'market-defying' decisions of Chinese firms. Opium is an

important livelihood for farmers living just beyond China's borders in Myanmar and Laos, and efforts to eradicate its cultivation since the 1970s have been largely ineffective (Cohen 2009). In 2004, in response to a troubling rise in domestic opiate use, the Chinese government established the Opium Replacement Programme (ORP), which aims to reduce opium cultivation by encouraging growers to switch to licit cash crops. To achieve this, it provides financial and bureaucratic support to Chinese companies investing in large-scale commercial agriculture where opium is grown in northern Laos and Myanmar, including highly valuable quotas for importing rubber back to China tax-free. Rubber has become the main crop established by participating companies, and its reputation as an alternative to opium and shifting cultivation, and more broadly as a tool for developing and taming remote, peripheral spaces, has been eagerly adopted by Lao state officials who have also promoted the crop and catalysed a wave of Chinese capital that flooded into Laos through the 2000s (Lu 2017; Lu and Schönweger 2019).

The import quotas granted to firms by the Chinese state through the ORP and the Lao state's treatment of rubber as a form of development cooperation have generated firm-level behaviour that resembles logics of encompassing accumulation, but through different mechanisms than those that Lee observes in Zambia's mining sector. Quotas are especially important to rubber investors because rubber imports are taxed at such high rates. Since a drop in global rubber prices in 2011, moreover, quotas have become the defining factor in whether Lao rubber can reach the Chinese market because companies in Laos (state and private, Chinese and non-Chinese) cannot profitably process and export rubber without them. As a result, much of the rubber tapped even in central and southern Laos "is being transported overland and traded through the Yunnan border instead of going through the far closer borders with Thailand or Vietnam" (interview, Khammouane, December 2017; interview, Vientiane, June

2019). And because quotas are granted based on companies' previous import volumes, Chinese investors participating in the ORP—which constitutes nearly all Chinese rubber companies in northern Laos, private and state owned alike—are incentivised to procure a steady quantity of rubber regardless of the market price, as they cannot risk not filling their quota and losing their allotment or having it reduced. As Chinese ORP companies jockey to source smallholder rubber, they keep prices competitive and continue buying smallholder latex even when prices are too low for Vietnamese and Thai companies operating in Laos to collect beyond their own plantations. As in Lee's case of NFCA, Chinese state support allows Chinese rubber investors in Laos greater flexibility and resilience to market downturns than their counterparts from other countries, though the incentive structure that ORP quotas creates differs from what drives a typical Chinese state-owned enterprise's logic of encompassing accumulation and also drives all ORP investors, state and private.

There has also been an effort over the past few years for Chinese rubber companies in Laos to work with both the Lao state and the Yunnan provincial government to lobby the central government in Beijing for an expansion of ORP quotas (interview, Kunming, December 2017; interview, Vientiane, August 2018). This would benefit Chinese firms in Laos in obvious ways—for instance, by allowing them to export even more rubber from Laos to China tax-free—and advantage the entire rubber sector across Laos by improving its access to the Chinese market. The ORP could also help solidify Yunnan's place as the hub for rubber processing in China, which generates province-level state revenues. But rubber farmers in Yunnan already foresee the Lao market eroding the advantages protective rubber tariffs provide them and insist on their need for continued state support (interview, Xishuangbanna, May 2018). All of these actors evoke the strategic importance of rubber and in doing so position themselves as contributors to Chinese resource security and economic independence,

despite representing contrasting interests and sometimes even advocating for different policy interventions. The result is the construction of complex networks of power and connections around the increasingly transnational rubber supply chain that drive and shape the influx of Chinese capital in Laos.

Nuances of Chinese State Capital

Through its contrasts with copper mining in Zambia, the case of Chinese rubber investments in Laos can bring insights into the nuances within the category of 'Chinese state capital'. Rubber is considered strategic in multiple ways—not solely as a key industrial material of which having a secure supply is deemed an issue of national security (like copper), but also as a tool for civilising China's remote borderlands, a development cooperation intervention, and an alternative to opium cultivation. Using the case of rubber, I argue that treating the label of 'strategic' as a discourse reminds us not to take that label for granted, but rather to interrogate the history of how resources come to be deemed strategic, recognise differences in how they are strategic, and unravel the networks of actors and their corresponding interests surrounding that resource. I suggest this as a way of better understanding the decision-making of individual firms in strategic sectors and the mechanisms structuring the logic of encompassing accumulation. Lee attributes to Chinese state capital as it extends beyond China's borders. ■



From Africa to Saipan:

What Happens When Chinese Construction Firms ‘Go Global’?

Chinese construction workers return home after protesting for their unpaid wages outside the Imperial Pacific casino. Saipan, 2017. PC: Daniel Lin.

Aaron HALEGUA

For the past several years, I have been deeply engaged with a case involving the exploitation of thousands of Chinese workers by Chinese construction firms on the island of Saipan—part of the United States Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI). This essay explores the extent to which Professor Ching Kwan Lee’s findings and conclusions about overseas Chinese construction firms, drawn from her fieldwork in Zambia (Lee 2017), are consistent with the events that transpired in Saipan. More specifically, the Saipan and Zambia cases are used to examine three issues: labour conditions at Chinese construction firms and the role that

state- or private-ownership plays; the plight of Chinese migrant workers on these overseas projects; and, what avenues may be available for contesting such abuses.

By way of background, the CNMI is a series of islands in the Pacific Ocean of which the largest and most populated is Saipan. After World War II, the CNMI was part of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands administered by the United States, and then formed a political union with the United States in 1976. At that time, there were no quotas or tariffs on goods shipped from the CNMI to the United States. The CNMI also retained control over its immigration system and set its own minimum

wage. This combination proved very attractive to apparel manufacturers, who could bring in foreign labourers from various parts of Asia and pay them extremely little. This allowed for the development of a garment industry that exported 1 billion USD in goods each year and employed tens of thousands of factory workers to develop on the island.

However, after the media exposed the horrible labour abuses engaged in by garment employers in the late 1990s, a series of class action lawsuits brought down the industry. The US Congress also ‘federalised’ control over immigration to Saipan, stripping the local government of this power, and set a schedule for Saipan to implement the federal minimum wage.

The CNMI struggled economically after the garment industry disappeared, but around 2013 began a process to legalise gambling and the construction of a casino. An exclusive license was issued to Imperial Pacific, a company based in Hong Kong but owned by a mainland Chinese family, which then hired multiple Chinese construction firms to build the casino and hotel in Saipan. The firms employed very few local construction workers; instead importing thousands of workers from China.

The Use and Abuse of Chinese Workers

Lee’s depiction of Chinese construction projects in Zambia shares many parallels with the situation in Saipan. Lee noted how the Chinese state or banks financed these projects (usually through loans) and then the contracts went to Chinese firms. Many central state-owned enterprises (SOEs) established profit-driven subsidiaries that sought out overseas construction projects. They competed alongside a large number of privately-owned Chinese construction firms for these contracts.

In the Saipan project, while the money came from a Chinese developer instead of a Chinese bank, the process was similar. Imperial Pacific

hired as its general contractor a subsidiary of the Metallurgical Corporation of China (MCC), a central SOE mining conglomerate headquartered in Beijing. Other contractors included a subsidiary of Gold Mantis, a Suzhou-based firm traded on the Shenzhen Stock Exchange, and Nanjing Beilida, a privately-owned firm from Nanjing. At least four other Chinese companies, including privately-owned firms and provincial SOEs, had contracts related to the casino project.

In the Zambian construction sector, Lee argues that all Chinese firms, regardless of ownership type, had a ‘purely commercial’ motive (2017, 54) and were totally ‘market- and profit-driven’ (2017, 4). She contends that ‘both types of capital were relentless exploiters of labor, illustrated by the uniformly abysmal conditions of labor in the construction sector’ (2017, 156). Whereas the mining sector in Zambia still had some union presence, collective bargaining, and longer-term contracts, albeit less and less over time, the construction industry lacked all of these things. The absence of unions allowed the ‘unrelenting process of casualization’ (Lee 2017, 25) and reliance on subcontracting to dominate the industry; and the short-term projects and shorter-term employment contracts made organising workers difficult (Lee 2017, 25).

The Saipan case exhibited all of these trends—with an added twist that virtually all workers were imported from China. Some of them had proper guest worker visas, but once these visas were exhausted, rather than offer a wage high enough to attract local residents, the companies illegally employed Chinese construction workers who entered Saipan as ‘tourists’. While there were some minute differences between contractors in terms of labour conditions, and between workers with and without visas, they paled in comparison to the similarities. Indeed, all workers were living in the same crowded dormitories and working on the same construction site. The workers were compelled to labour for 13 hours per day, seven days per week, and were compensated well below the minimum wage, if paid at all.

The Chinese contractors demonstrated little regard for the safety of the workers, many of whom described the conditions as worse than those in China. At least one worker fell to his death from the casino's scaffolding. The injury incidence rate on the project exceeded the national average for US construction sites. The companies also housed workers in dormitories lacking a certificate of occupancy, failed to provide sufficient showers, and reportedly fed them rotten food on occasion.

Lee discusses Chinese companies' preference for Chinese workers willing to 'eat bitterness', noting that they often bend visa rules in Zambia to bring in such employees. While some argue this trend of using Chinese citizens for manual labour is decreasing, the Saipan case makes clear that this practice is far from extinct. And this is particularly so in remote places with little local skilled labour. As Jerome Cohen and I have noted elsewhere (2019), host jurisdictions often lump these hordes of workers together with Chinese banks and companies as part of an 'invading' force; however, in reality these labourers are often themselves victimised by their Chinese employers. Whereas disaffected local workers may simply quit, it is not so easy for Chinese workers stationed abroad. Many incurred debts to work overseas, they sign multi-year contracts, employers often confiscate their passports, and those workers lacking proper visas are scared to seek assistance from local authorities—even if language barriers and physical distance were not a large enough deterrent. So even if these Chinese workers sometimes command a higher salary than locals, having such a captive workforce is often very attractive to employers.

Contesting Abuse and the Role of Bad Publicity

These tales of exploitation and abuse from Zambia, Saipan, and elsewhere raise the question: what can be done in response? Lee

spends a significant portion of her book on the methods through which workers in Zambia attempted to contest capital. While in Zambia wildcat strikes occurred in the construction industry, mostly around the issue of pay, the workers' leverage was limited and thus any gains were incremental and temporal. Workers had more success in those cases where they had an organised union or, even more so, when their interests aligned with those of the Zambian government. While these factors were sometimes present in the mining industry, the construction sector lacked any worker organisation; and since the construction industry was not a strategic priority, the host government was often more likely to side with employers than workers.

Once again, the Saipan case largely confirms Lee's observations. Saipan had no unions at all, let alone in the construction sector, and a group of foreign guest workers lacking the proper visas did not organise the first one. While the project was ongoing, there were some wildcat strikes by unpaid workers. These actions triggered labour authorities to get involved and the employers often paid what was owed—but then continued to pay workers illegally low wages. It took the intervention of the US federal authorities to put an end to these practices—which persisted for well over one year—and remedy the abuses. After receiving multiple worker complaints, the US Department of Labour eventually undertook an investigation, interviewing hundreds of workers, and ultimately concluded settlements requiring MCC, Gold Mantis, Nanjing Beilida, and others to compensate 2,400 workers nearly 14 million USD in unpaid wages and recruitment fees. The workplace safety authority, OSHA, found over 20 serious violations by these employers and issued nearly 200,000 USD in fines. Managers of MCC and Nanjing Beilida were criminally prosecuted for illegally employing unauthorised workers.

Perhaps most interesting is that all of the Chinese contractors exhibited some sensitivity to public pressure. After the FBI raided the construction site and most managers fled back

to China, it was the workers who remained in Saipan, staging protests and generating media attention, who got paid the fastest and the most. The firms often paid them in cash, if they promised to return immediately to China. Some protesting workers were even able to negotiate compensation for injuries suffered on the project site. Their colleagues who had already returned to China would eventually be paid through the US Department of Labour settlements, but not until many months later.

Lee determined that all Chinese construction firms in Africa were driven to maximise profit, and it was only the SOEs that occasionally considered other factors, such as China's political objectives or national image (54). However, in Saipan, this seemed to be true of all of the contractors, as even the publicly-traded company (Gold Mantis) and the private firm (Nanjing Beilida) agreed to pay millions of dollars in owed wages. Given that none of the contractors had significant assets in Saipan after the FBI raid essentially shut down the project, making them effectively 'judgment proof', the firms could have chosen to simply ignore the protesting workers and the US Department of Labour. Thus, there must have been some non-economic motivations for reaching these large settlements over wage violations. Part of the answer may lie in how little the Chinese media—in strong contrast with the foreign press—reported on the Saipan case. This suggests that Chinese authorities considered the incident to be politically embarrassing, which may have motivated the responsible companies to settle the matter in order to avoid any trouble with their own government.

towards their own compatriots. Furthermore, as Chinese firms are often operating in jurisdictions where host governments are unlikely to meaningfully ensure labour standards, and unions are often weak or non-existent, international media may be one of the few avenues available for applying any sort of pressure to these Chinese companies. There remains the unfortunate reality, however, that journalists in many of these countries do not always operate with total freedom. Nonetheless, how international media may be leveraged to improve the treatment of workers is a topic worthy of further study.

In conclusion, when it comes to the construction industry, Chinese firms of all ownership types seem to have a similar operational model—long hours, low wages, and limited concern for health and safety, all exacerbated by pervasive subcontracting—regardless of whether they are operating in Zambia, Saipan, or elsewhere. It remains difficult for workers to contest their oppression without intervention by the host government, although the reputational sensitivities of some Chinese firms may occasionally present opportunities for redress. All in all, Lee's somewhat depressing depiction of workers employed by Chinese construction firms in Africa seems to unfortunately be more the rule than the exception worldwide. ■

Future Directions

As China continues in its quest to be respected on the world stage, there may be increasing opportunities to use public pressure and media attention to influence Chinese companies engaged in abusive practices—even



Jamaica at Caribbean Sea.
PC: @zwzzjim, Flickr.com.

Varieties of Capital and Predistribution

The Foundations of Chinese Infrastructural Investment in the Caribbean

Ruben GONZALEZ-VICENTE

At a moment when many politicians and media outlets in the ‘West’ seem adamant to portray China as an antagonist to the United States eager to craft a less-than-capitalist new world order, Ching Kwan Lee’s *The Specter of Global China* (2017) offers a breath of fresh air. Lee’s meticulous investigation of the varieties of Chinese capital in Zambia is full of revelations. At the most basic level, her treatment of Chinese investment as a form of capital distances us from essentialist descriptions that present Chinese firms as foreign policy pawns eminently guided by the invisible hand of the Chinese Communist Party.

Instead, Lee explains how Chinese construction firms operate in remarkably similar ways to contemporary forms of global private capital. Chinese state capital in Zambia’s mining sector is subject to market imperatives as well, yet eschews profit maximisation to embrace a logic of ‘encompassing accumulation’ that pursues both market profitability and state strategic goals—although the latter includes issues of resource access and political capital that can be understood as building into plans for long-term market-based economic growth. The book explores not only the logics of accumulation of firms (i.e. what drives their business decision-

making) but also goes on to unpack the contingent forms of labour exploitation and managerial ethos that shape the trajectory and impacts of Chinese capital in Zambia.

In this short essay I focus on Lee's framework of logics of accumulation to explain how her book has helped me to gain a better understanding of Chinese economic activities in Latin America and the Caribbean. Above all, Lee's work stands out for its ability to encapsulate a complex and ambitious research agenda in a succinct question: 'Is Chinese state capital a different kind of capital?' (Lee 2017, 28) or, as she phrased it at a workshop in 2011: 'What is Chinese about Chinese capitalism?' Beyond its apparent simplicity, the question is revelatory for those of us who study Global China and who have seen our field inundated with problematic research agendas often based in normative and biased positions, such as: 'what does China in Latin America mean for the United States?', 'are Chinese activities in Africa good or bad?', or, more commonly, 'how bad are they?' *The Specter of Global China* instead offers a comparative framework that is at the same time attentive to the particularities of Chinese investments and to their embeddedness within a particular economic context in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Shifting the Focus

My own work in the Caribbean seeks answers to similar questions as those asked by Lee. However, unlike Lee in her examination of Chinese capital in the construction sector in Zambia, I am inclined to suggest that Chinese infrastructural investment in the Caribbean *does* represent a distinct form of capital when compared with local and transnational construction companies in the region. The key to the divergence in our interpretations is not that I unveil trends that are remarkably different to those observed by Lee. It is instead a matter of analytical perspective or scale. In her book, Lee puts her 'first moment of

comparative inquiry' at the level of the firm, investigating how 'two types of capital seek to accumulate' (Lee 2017, 11). This leads to the critical insight that Chinese state capital in the mining sector has 'imperatives that included profit making *and other utilities*' (Lee 2017, 12, emphasis in the original), while Chinese state and private construction capital does not. I situate my initial inquiry earlier, investigating the moment of 'predistribution', or the broader societal and institutional frameworks that accompany a type of investment in the first place and which exist in symbiotic relationships with specific forms of capital.

I use the idea of 'predistribution' to illustrate how any form of capital requires enabling environments to prosper, and to emphasise that in the case of Chinese construction investments in the Caribbean these environments are not preexisting but established by government-to-government agreements involving Chinese diplomatic branches, policy banks, companies, and host country institutions. Jacob Hacker has described predistribution as the myriad ways in which a government 'can shape the distribution of income and opportunity in a society that are distinct from simply taxing and providing benefits' (Hacker 2013, 54). From this vantage point, Hacker aims to promote interventions that prevent inequality of opportunities in the market, an approach that he presents as a viable alternative to palliative remedies that seek to undo uneven market outcomes through taxes and redistribution. The term can nonetheless also be used to refer precisely to the social and institutional frameworks that foment capitalist accumulation and unequal market outcomes in the first place. The idea is not too different—albeit narrower and with a more limited focus on the state—than the feminist insight that there exist forms of care work that often pass as extra-economic but which are intrinsic to social reproduction. Drawing from this insight, my argument is that the combination of Chinese state-led predistribution through government-to-government arrangements in the Caribbean, and firm-based accumulation, adds up to a distinct *mechanism of accumulation*.

Caribbean: A History of (Under)development

Before discussing the particulars of these mechanisms of accumulation, it is important to recapitulate how different types of capital have been tied to specific forms of social organisation through the history of (under)development in the Caribbean. An apt example is found at the earliest stage of the Caribbean's integration into international markets. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, profit in the region was realised within a framework of imperialism and plantation economies that depended on the institution of slavery—a social configuration that brutally predistributed both unfree labour and fertile lands to European investors (Williams 1984). Following the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade in the early nineteenth century, new legal frameworks were created to facilitate the arrival of indentured labour from places like India and China, contributing to the survival of the plantation system. Whereas processes of national independence in the British Caribbean in the second half of the twentieth century were paired with attempts to escape economic dependence on Europe and North America, the latter were short-lived. The new accumulation frameworks that emerged during this period were characterised by persisting structural challenges, pressures by international investors, and the threat and reality of US-led military interventions to curtail socialist experimentation in the region (Meeks & Girvan 2010). In particular, the United States invasion of Grenada in 1983 signaled the geopolitical limits to political and economic independence.

Increasingly and since the 1980s, a wave of neoliberal policy has swept over the region—favouring the conditions for accumulation that Lee associates with a type of financialised corporation devoted to shareholder value maximisation. Predistribution to subsidise capital adopts a visibly (neo)liberal form in the contemporary Caribbean, while often perpetuating postcolonial legacies

and enhancing structural constraints. This requires that whole societies commit to liberal investment regimes, flexibilisation of labour, and anti-inflationary regimes that, as Streeck (2016) explains, are in place to protect the rate of return on capital. The conventional Washington and post-Washington Consensus have engendered a context in which ongoing processes of primitive accumulation are carried out through institutional reform promoted and forced by organisations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF). These institutional arrangements create markets and investment opportunities where before there were none, with profit to be realised by private capital. In this model there is a clear line between the formation of the overall legal-institutional framework on the one hand, and the process of production on the other.

Chinese investments in the Caribbean inevitably encounter these previously existing political economic realities, or as Lee puts it, 'legacies of underdevelopment and struggle' (Lee 2017, 14). The Caribbean region is particularly diverse. It includes both high-income economies such as oil and gas rich Trinidad or tourism havens like Barbados, as well as struggling economies such as debt-ridden Jamaica. However, common across the region is the relative absence of local capital eager to invest in large-scale infrastructural development or diversification away from traditional sectors. The challenges to diversification are enhanced by the small size and high degrees of liberalisation of many Caribbean economies in a context of competitive capitalism. In cases like that of Jamaica, the weakness of domestic capital is also linked to 40 years of IMF-promoted austerity that has done little to raise the country from its position as one of the most heavily indebted in the world in per capita terms (Girvan 2012). Most of the states in the region remain heavily dependent on foreign investment and assistance that until recently arrived mostly from Europe and North America.

State-coordinated Investment Partnerships: The Case of Jamaica

In this context, Chinese capital has benefitted both from low barriers to entry as well as considerable demand for infrastructural investment. The overall mechanisms of accumulation promoted by Chinese investors are nonetheless distinct in that they merge primitive accumulation with the capture of profit through government-to-government deals. These deals can be defined as ‘state-coordinated investment partnerships’ in the sense that they are complex arrangements that involve diplomatic branches of the Chinese state in negotiation with local counterparts, Chinese policy banks, and construction firms that work together to create conditions for accumulation or ‘spatial fixes’ for Chinese capital (Gonzalez-Vicente 2019; Harvey 1981). If there is anything transformative and distinct about Chinese investment in the Caribbean, it has to do with its unique approach to predistribution as facilitated by wider mechanisms of accumulation.

These mechanisms are exemplified by the North-South highway project in Jamaica. The project to create a major highway connecting Ocho Rios in the north of the island and Kingston in the south has been in place since 1999, with some phases completed by the French contractor Bouygues Construction. The project ran into technical and financial problems in the late 2000s, forcing Bouygues to abandon it. Following a visit by Prime Minister Bruce Golding to Beijing in 2009, Jamaica’s then Minister of Transport and Works Mike Henry was tasked with negotiating an imaginative arrangement with a Chinese policy bank and the China Harbour Engineering Company (CHEC) that could allow the Jamaican government to complete the project without increasing the country’s debt burden (Golding 2018). The initial contacts thus involved a large number of actors, including high-level government

officials, state policy banks, and a state-owned construction company. The negotiations resulted in a 457-million-USD loan by the China Development Bank (of a total of six loans for roadworks for a value of 1.8 billion USD lent to Jamaica by both the CDB and China Exim Bank). The loan carried no broader policy conditionalities like those attached to IMF and World Bank lending, but it was agreed that CHEC would complete the project without an open call for tenders. The loan itself was repaid with the transfer of 1,200 acres of prime land in the northern and southern coasts of the island, while CHEC was granted the operation of the toll road for 50 years. In itself, this complex financial engineering is quite unique to Chinese infrastructural capital in the region. Treating these partnerships as ‘construction capital’ can be misleading, as projects like the North-South highway involve construction firms but also public policy banks (which replace the role played by private shareholders in global financialised firms), and institutional facilitators. There are hence various logics of accumulation at play within any singular infrastructure project. Together, these logics underpin a novel mechanism of accumulation.

All in all, these partnerships allow heavily indebted governments, such as the Jamaican one, to pay in kind (land, in this case, and oil, copper or cocoa in others). However, and crucially, this type of arrangement also requires spaces of exception where sovereignty is effectively circumvented to enable the realisation of profit. In the particular case of the North-South Highway, Chinese labourers brought to work in the project embodied Chinese sovereignties as they remained subject to Chinese labour law (Gonzalez-Vicente 2019). This form of ‘embodied transnational sovereignty’ entails salaries that are below the Jamaican minimum wage, and the inability to join independent unions—effectively transposing China’s exploitative labour conditions to Jamaica. Moreover, CHEC remained exempt from customs duties on equipment and machinery, as well as a number of other taxes. In sum, while CHEC could

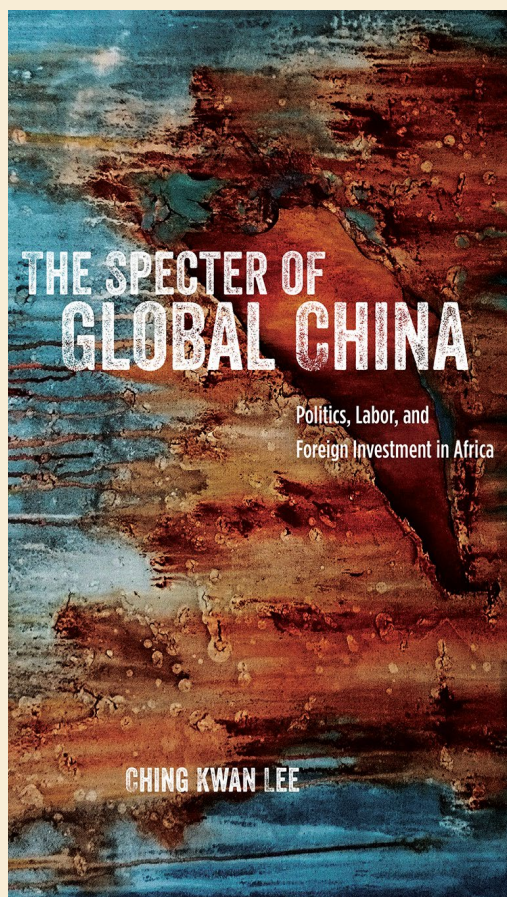
entertain profit maximisation rationales just like other transnational investors, the broader framework or mechanisms of accumulation devised around its investments in Jamaica neatly distinguish CHEC from other local and transnational investors. This is something that has not gone unnoticed in Jamaica, where local contractors have often complained that Chinese corporations benefit from unfair advantages that allow them to outcompete and displace local businesses (Kelly 2019). Indeed, the North-South Highway is just one example out of many, and the same formula or mechanism of accumulation is replicated in a number of Chinese construction projects in Trinidad and Tobago, Antigua and Barbuda, Guyana, and other Caribbean countries. Together, they attest to the distinctiveness of Chinese infrastructural capital if one places the focus of enquiry not on the firm but on the wider institutional configurations required to realise profit.

A New Framework

To conclude, I would like to add that Lee's framework allows us not only to break the typical China-versus-the West dichotomy, but also to avoid narrowly focusing on the varying weight of the state in an investment project. Instead, it prompts us to focus on the guiding imperatives and interests that shape the behaviours and impacts of different types of investors. In fact, it would be a mistake to characterise Chinese investments in the Caribbean as particularly 'statist'. A focus on mechanisms of accumulation allows us to see, for example, the high levels of state intervention inherent to British imperialism in the Caribbean, or to the militarily-driven neocolonial order crafted by the United States in the region following the decline of British hegemony. After all, one could hardly understand the economic success of British merchants in the West Indies or of the United Fruit Company through the broader Caribbean

region without reference to the heavy hand of the British and United States governments in building political environments that facilitated exploitative economic activities. In more recent decades, many have argued that neoliberal hegemony diminished state involvement in the market, but others have called this into question (Weiss, 1998). For example, as Quinn Slobodian has noted in his study of the influential Geneva School, the aim of neoliberalism was never to reduce the power of institutions in society, but to devise a model of governance that could 'encase the global market from interference by national governments' subject to democratic pressures (Slobodian 2018, 20). In this way, institutions such as the IMF or the World Trade Organisation, dominated by Western economies and overwhelmingly representing the interests of capital, have enjoyed unparalleled leverage to intervene in Caribbean economies in the last four decades.

Through different stages in its history, the Caribbean has been a playground where different varieties of capital have benefitted from the combination of intervening foreign state power and entrepreneurial thrust in the quest for profit. As individual units making the best out of market opportunities, Chinese construction firms in the Caribbean follow profit-maximisation rationales that mirror those of global private investors. As part of a broader effort to create and materialise opportunities for profit, they reveal new mechanisms of accumulation that are already transforming the face of Caribbean development. ■



Ching Kwan Lee, *The Specter of Global China, Politics, Labor, and Foreign Investment in Africa*, University of Chicago Press, 2018.

Outbound Chinese state capital is just one instance of global China. China's global reach is taking many forms in many arenas: migration, global media networks, higher education, scientific research, regional and global multilateral credit institutions, expansion of Chinese NGOs abroad, and so forth. To understand China's global impact in these areas, scholars cannot artificially seal Chinese phenomena within China's geographical borders. This applies not just to topics that are intrinsically international or regional. Even subjects that may appear purely 'domestic'—such as rural development, land grabs, social movements, corruption, governance, and elite politics—are seldom really so. For instance, land grabs in China have their dynamics and causes rooted in the Chinese political economy, but they are part of a global wave of land dispossession afflicting Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia, partly caused and exacerbated by a new round of speculative investment in food and agriculture by global financial capital, or by state-sponsored projects of building global cities. Comparing, connecting, and contextualising domestic Chinese phenomena with what is happening elsewhere will yield deeper and fuller understandings of events within China and, more importantly, what makes them 'Chinese'.

Ching Kwan Lee, *The Specter of Global China*, interview published in the *Made in China Journal* on 24 December 2017.



Variety of Capital?

Chinese Multinational
Corporations in Europe

PC: @Cronenberg1978,
Flickr.com.

Yu ZHENG
Chris SMITH

How do we approach the internationalisation of Chinese capital? With US company expansion came Americanisation and Fordism; with Japanese internationalisation, Japanisation and transplantation. So does the geographical shift of Chinese multinational companies (MNCs)—often under state ownership—bring with it Sinification? The recent work of Ching Kwan Lee (2017), on Chinese companies in Zambia may offer some pointers for comparison. Below we quickly outline Lee's theoretical approach, and then consider the empirical distinctiveness of Chinese MNCs in Europe, which we believe challenges the rather binary choices posed by

Lee's approach. In looking at Chinese MNCs in Europe, we see divergent national traits, and different local and global adaptations.

Binary Choices

Lee's excellent *The Specter of Global China* is notable for its case study material and the author's struggle to access, reveal, and interpret data gathered over many years of painstaking empirical work. However, the book is not exceptional theoretically. Lee articulates what she calls a 'varieties of capital',

not capitalism, approach to distance her work from comparative institutionalists, who see capitalism as divergent due to its embedding in national institutions that integrate both capital and labour in nationally diverse, but archetypal, ways (Hall and Soskice 2001). This latter approach operates at the national level, whereas Lee builds from the ground up, stressing the importance of contexts where work and workers' struggles are embedded. But she is also concerned with the national, as her focus is the legacies of state capitalism in China and its internationalisation. This approach starts within theory and uses the empirical theoretically. However, her theorising assembles sharp binary comparisons between Chinese state capital and all other forms of capital, empirically expressed through two sectors: mining and construction in Zambia.

Chinese capital, like all capital, exists in what she sees as 'three moments': accumulation, production, and ethos (echoing Weber's cultural 'spirit of capitalism'). But, Lee suggests that in all three moments there are but two pathways: for accumulation, either 'profit maximisation' (global private capital) or 'profit optimisation' (Chinese state capital); for production, regimes that control to extract 'maximum surplus value' (non-Chinese production) or for 'stability and flexibility' (Chinese state capital), i.e. giving something to workers, and not simply controlling and exploiting them; and with ethos there is also the binary choice between a Chinese 'collective asceticism' (or 'eating bitterness') and a Western (or non-Chinese) 'ethos of individualistic careerism' (Lee 2017, 11–13). Lee's robust comparative approach leaves little room for diversity and complexity, as there are only sharp binary choices in all three moments.

Through the empirical chapters, contrasts are made between MNC investments from different nations, and private and state capital, and the different pressures they bring into the workplace. Investment, for example, is compared between long-term (slow profits and technical development) versus short-term (finance and profit-taking). Labour is divided

between casual employment contracts and regular ones, and labour organisation in Zambia is analysed in the past and today—as recalled by older and younger workers. Further, Lee contrasts Chinese capital in the two sectors: in construction, where it fits within the casualised labour model dominant in the sector; and in mining, where Chinese managers behave differently from their counterparts in other mining MNCs—working longer hours, living in more basic dormitory accommodation, having deferred methods of payment, and interacting more informally with employees. This makes Chinese managers altogether different from expatriate managers from the US, UK, and South African MNCs. The 'spirit' of Chinese capital in mining is heavily conditioned by privatisation reforms in China, with its intense competition for work and what is referred to as the sacrifice managers make by hard work and private deprivations ('eating bitterness')—considered a normal part of being a manager.

The European Case

Lee's work shows the mutual conditioning between the home country and host country practices, but we also need to understand the global neoliberal conditions that allow for Chinese expansion, and this takes us away from a simple interaction between states and state-linked entities. Capital is institutionalised, but not simply through national rules, as uneven development and competition for dominance between capitalist powers means there are 'dominance effects' alongside system and society effects (Smith and Meiksins 1995).

The international expansion of Chinese MNCs into Europe symbolises a substantial reconfiguration of the global economic and political order (Hanemann and Huotari 2018). Access to strategic assets in order to 'catch-up' and potentially 'overtake' MNCs from the more advanced economies is arguably the main driver for increasing merger and acquisition (M&A) activities of Chinese MNCs in Europe

(Ramamurti and Hillemann 2018). With a focus on building technological expertise and managerial know-how through M&As, some Chinese MNCs run a tiered employment system in their European subsidiaries: filling the top managerial positions with professionals sourced in the host countries while sending an extensive number of home-sourced employees to work in key functions, such as the R&D department (Zheng and Smith 2018). The scale of the home-sourced workforce varies across host countries, industrial sectors, and firm sizes.

Treating the case of Chinese MNCs as a new international player emerging from a labour-rich country, the source of heterogeneity (or uniqueness) is often traced back to the 'national model' of labour management, promoted by big firms and backed-up by an emerging powerful state (Tungli and Peiperl 2009; Megbowon et al. 2019). In line with this nationality discourse, some argue that Chinese MNCs are at a developmental stage and hence learning from, and evolving towards, MNCs from the more developed world (Shen and Edwards 2004). The tiered employment system is developed to facilitate a distinctive pattern of knowledge diffusion, in which the home-sourced workforce acts as agents of knowledge transfer between the acquired subsidiaries and the parent firms (Zhang and Edwards 2007). China's transitional institutional environment and its lack of a representative national model of international staffing have encouraged an approach in subsidiary management where trust relations are personal, not bureaucratic and standardised (Cooke, Saini, and Wang 2014). The preference for using 'professional' managers and 'trusted' employees mirrors the need for continuous and incremental adjustment to a dynamic external environment, seen by some as unique to the Chinese MNCs as well (Liu and Woywode 2013).

The strengths of this nationality discourse, also evident in Lee, lies in highlighting the distinctiveness in the patterns of employment relations and in tracing the national social institutions that enable or embrace these

patterns. The 'home country' serves as an underlining reference point to explain the employment policies adopted by MNCs. These studies are insightful in terms of unpacking the 'Chineseness' embodied in the patterns of employment relations. However, it seems we rarely raise the question of what the distinctiveness of the newcomers' approach means to 'the rules of the game' played by multinationals, which to a large extent reflects 'a predominantly Anglo-American approach to theorising the MNCs' (Mathews 2006). The empirical significance of the tiered employment system points us towards rethinking the dominant paradigm on the comparative studies. In particular, we need to consider roles played by Chinese MNCs as agents of capital, which takes commodification of labour beyond the national stage and into an increasingly integrated global labour market. It might well be time to move away from probing the national origins or Chinese character of expansion, and reframe employment relations in Chinese MNCs in the context of the international political economy of capital relocation and cross-border work deployment.

Concluding Remarks

On a positive note Lee's work brought out the more micro-level elements of internationalisation, especially exploring the contests between local workers and international employers. More problematic are the binary contrasts between different cultures of capital, stressing the tendency for national or home-country practices to frame management-worker interactions, with a concomitant understatement of the emergence of general practices, such as precarious forms of employment and the use of migrant labour at all levels within the international firm, and the sense in which systemic elements of capitalism—not different capitals—continues as the common language of work, whatever the context.

The tiered employment system observed in our studies of the Chinese MNCs in Europe signifies the fact that transnational labour deployment is driven by the increasing international mobility of capital against the backdrop of more relaxed regulatory institutions. The tiered employment system underpins more transaction-based employment relations formed between MNCs and a wider group of international migrants, professionals, and workers, which have become more visible in MNCs. We suggest that it is not simply a national characteristic that Chinese MNCs source local professionals to manage and train the workforce from the home country. Rather, it shows the increased ability of capital to access and mobilise an international migrant workforce, which is rooted in a global trend of informalisation of international employment relations and segmentation of international workforces.

It is also worth noting that the tiered employment system observed in our studies of the Chinese MNCs in Europe is emblematic of the complexity and diversity of reorganising work in a new space—echoing the way that Lee’s work highlights the fact that Chinese MNCs are political actors and able to challenge the reality imposed upon them by other institutional actors, such as government officials and rival MNCs from the more advanced economies. The power of these actors is uneven, and therefore employment outcomes vary. This contested terrain of international employment relations gives rise to variance in (and will continue to shape) the use of international migrant workforce among the Chinese MNCs in Europe. ■

A Film by STEVEN BOGNAR and JULIA REICHERT

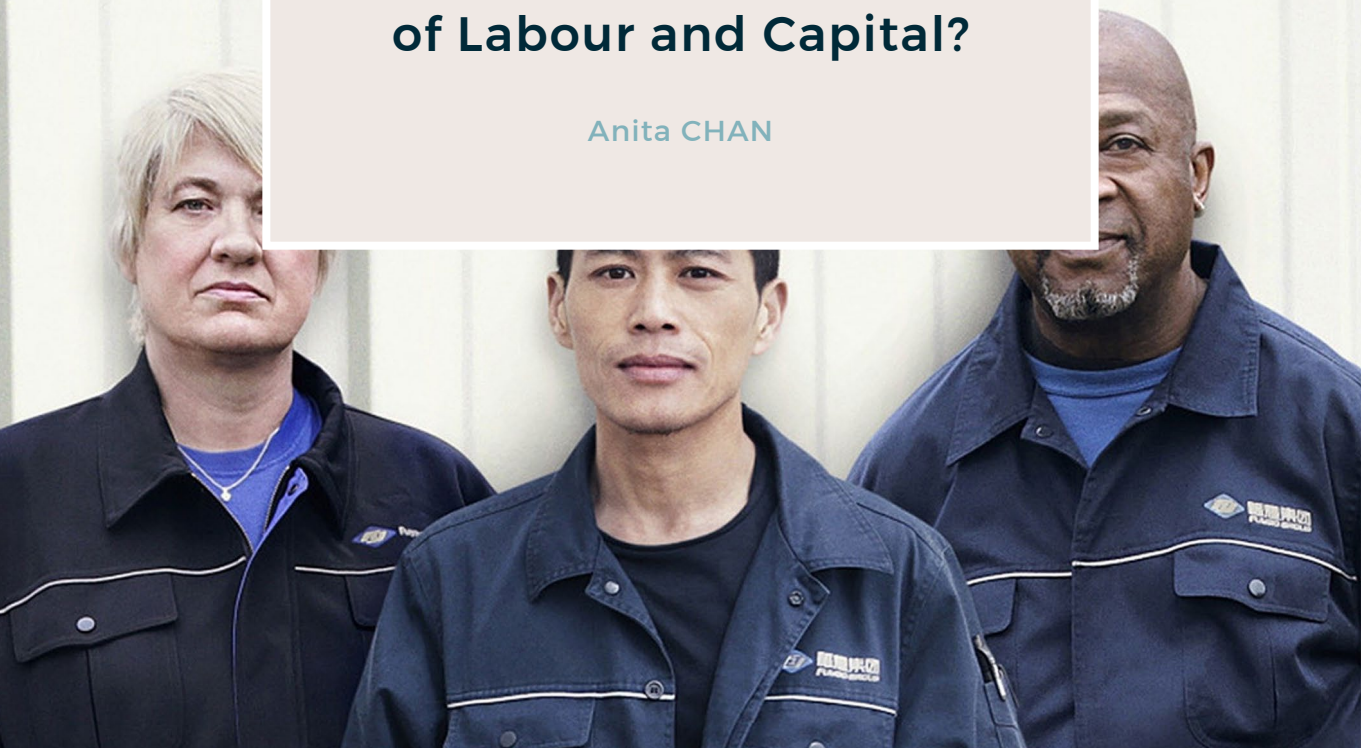
AMERICAN FACTORY

WORK OF ARTS

American Factory

Clash of Cultures or a Clash
of Labour and Capital?

Anita CHAN



American Factory

Clash of Cultures or a Clash of Labour and Capital?

Anita CHAN

American Factory, a documentary released in 2019 by Netflix, has attracted attention in both America and China—even more so after it won the 2020 Academy Award for feature documentary. The film documents the attempts of the owner of the Fuyao Glass Company—an enterprise that supplies 70 percent of the windshields and windows for China's automobiles—to open a factory in a disused General Motors (GM) assembly plant in Dayton, Ohio, a city that was once one of the sites of American industrial power.

Immediately after the movie was released, a flurry of movie reviews appeared in both countries. For the Americans, it is the first time that the operations of a foreign-owned factory in the US have been so widely publicised in almost 40 years—since the 1980s, when Japanese automobile transplants mushroomed on American soil, stirring up popular apprehensions about foreign investment. This time, the anxiety is about Chinese investment, and can be seen as a proxy for wider concerns about China's rise and the decline of America's industrial heartland. On the Chinese side, pirated copies of the film have attracted significant public attention. According to reactions on Chinese social media, viewers in China tend to see the case of the Fuyao plant in the United States as a significant symbolic step towards the realisation of Xi Jinping's project of 'national rejuvenation', to counterpoise Trump's 'Make America Great Again'.

The film opens with tearful GM workers bidding farewell to the last truck rolling off the assembly line in 2008. Ten thousand workers lost their jobs, and many also lost their houses, community, and hope for the future. Older

workers in particular remained unemployed or semi-employed. In 2014, when Fuyao moved in, the town was euphoric—'Fuyao is the only game in town,' explains a former GM worker in the movie. The company was owned by a highly-successful Chinese private entrepreneur by the name of Cao Dewang. In television interviews and on Chinese websites, he was lauded as 'China's Number One Philanthropist' and 'China's King of Glass'. His setting up of a factory in the United States was regarded as a test of China's industrial prowess abroad. The factory hired 1,000 American workers, including a sizeable number of older former GM workers. The company also brought in a hundred hand-picked Chinese staff, mostly technicians and supervisors to train the American workers in glass making.

What Type of Culture?

When these two very different groups of employees were thrown together, it seemed like the perfect formula for a classic 'clash of cultures' situation. Indeed the word 'culture' is mentioned many times in the film by both the Chinese and the Americans. Here, I would argue that there are in reality two types of culture: first, the national, racial, or ethnic culture of the countries the different workforces come from; second, the industrial relations culture emerging from the institutional set-up of the workplace.

Explicitly or implicitly, the film repeatedly emphasises the national cultural difference. For instance, interviewed by a movie critic from *The New Yorker*, the two directors Steven Bognar and Julia Reichert were quoted as saying that 'in many ways, the contrasts in attitudes and practices [of the American and Chinese workers] come from the countries' different cultures' (Kolhatkar 2019). This emphasis on national cultural differences gives the impression that Chinese workers by nature are more hard working than their American counterparts. In scenes at both the Dayton plant

and at a giant Fuyao factory in Fujian province, the film portrays the Chinese as diligent, able to withstand hardship, and disciplined—qualities apparently lacking in the American workers. But the film also gives the American workers a chance to voice their own self-image as hard working, conscientious, willing to learn, and ready to identify with Fuyao, if only had they been treated with dignity.

At any workplace, there is also a second kind of culture that is borne out of management philosophy, institutional arrangements, and workers' awareness, i.e. workplace industrial relations culture. This is the culture that in business management studies is often ignored or subsumed under the 'national' type of culture. In *American Factory*, it is this kind of culture that gradually emerges as a sticking point. The development of events recorded in the film shows the shifting relationship between Cao's management style and the American workers, but the two directors do not make any overt comment and leave it to the audience to come up with their own interpretation. In the process, the two different workforces are caught in the nexus of these two cultural dimensions.

Attempts to Close the National Cultural Gap

At the management level, both the Chinese staff in Dayton and the American management that Fuyao hired hoped that the national cultural gap could be bridged and that they could coexist in harmony for the sake of the company's success. Both sets of managerial personnel tried to adjust to each other. To make it easier for the American employees and to adapt to local labour laws, the Chinese management agreed to an eight-hour three-shift system rather than the 12-hour two-shift system used in Fujian. The American managers deferentially addressed the overbearing Fuyao owner, Cao Dewang, as 'Chairman' and tried

hard to be accommodating to his whims. Cao, on his end, sought to appeal to the Americans' identity. He restrained from hanging up a large painting of the Great Wall in the foyer—the symbol of China's grandness and superior Chinese civilisation—for fear of impinging on American sensibilities. Instead, he ordered his staff to hang up something American.

On the shopfloor, Chinese and American workers initially also tried to overcome the national cultural divide. They were quite successful, despite the Chinese workers' superior status in the company's hierarchy and their authority as supervisors and trainers. The Americans were eager students and acknowledged that the Chinese were hardworking and competent. Despite the language barrier and difference in status they tried to make friends, with some success. 'We just bonded. We tried to learn from each other,' remarks an American worker who invited his Chinese colleagues for Christmas dinner and taught them how to shoot, a quintessentially American pastime.

Closing the Workplace Cultural Differences

In organisation studies and international management studies, much research has been done on differences in workplace cultures and how they could be hybridised. This process involves the creation of a third cultural space moulded out of the 'colonising' and 'colonised' culture (Shimoni and Bergmann 2006). With the Chinese being the coloniser and the Americans the colonised, in the case of Fuyao the authoritative actor in the designing of a hybridising management process would, therefore, be the Chinese management.

Fuyao was aware that to avoid distrust and conflict between the two workforces it needed to narrow the disparity between them. So, although the Chinese workers were more skilled and were supervisors, they were

paid less than the American workers. Their monthly wage was exactly the same as what they made in China, which I estimated was about 650 USD (5,000–5,600 yuan) a month. To supplement this low wage, they received a monthly food subsidy of 500 USD, for a total income of about 13,000 USD a year. Since the minimum wage in Ohio was 7.25 USD per hour, the wage and food subsidy together corresponded to exactly the state's minimum wage. The American workers made an hourly wage of 12.84 USD per hour, which amounted to roughly 25,600 USD a year, considerably less than what many of them had previously earned at General Motors. To put this into perspective, over the past several years low-paid American workers have been campaigning for a 15 USD minimum wage. To make things worse for the Chinese workforce, initially they were not allowed to bring their families. Wong, the film's main Chinese character, who is used by the film directors to represent the Chinese workers, was under enormous pressure to help get the glass-smelting ovens going and to meet production targets. He admitted that he cried in the evenings out of loneliness but dared not tell his co-workers.

Chinese Management Widening the Cultural Gap

Formally, Chairman Cao emphasised that Chinese and Americans should work together and should equally identify with Fuyao. At the same time, he and his management team devised a divide and rule policy to drive a wedge between the two groups. Even before the factory started production, a Chinese manager's speech to the Chinese workers drove home the message that there were big differences between Chinese and American cultures, a message that was regularly reiterated at all-

Chinese staff meetings. Chairman Cao went further, invoking nationalism and patriotism in his speeches to the Chinese workers:

We have not reached our goal... We are all Chinese. We were all born Chinese. You were born of Chinese mothers. No matter where you are you are Chinese. We Chinese come to America to open a factory. The important thing is not so much to make money, but how it would change Americans' view of the Chinese, their view of China.

The message to Chinese workers was clear: because production was not up to standard, they had to work harder not for money but for the image of their country. To boost production, they had to push the Americans to work harder without expecting a wage raise. Money was not their main motivation: their mission was to improve the image of the motherland.

Cao would have liked the Americans to work like Fuyao's workers in Fujian. He brought a few American managers to see how the mother factory managed work. They were surprised to see that work days began with militaristic roll-calls and drills, and that the young migrant workers worked at a steady rapid pace without regular breaks. One stunned American said it looked like the labour was 'non-stop'.

Back in Dayton, a speed-up in production duly began, arousing resentment among the American workers. Production could not meet the quotas set by Chairman Cao, who was eager to recoup his investment. The American workers, no longer in their youth, were slow in grasping the skills, with the productivity in the plant in the United States being only about half of that of Fuyao in Fujian. A Chinese supervisor, when pressured to explain the poor production record, muttered: 'Their fingers are chubby.' Glass making is heavy work prone to injuries, and the speedup took its toll. Still, reasonable harmony persisted up to this point, as many of the workers were glad about being employed and wanted to give the company the benefit of the doubt.

The American chief manager was suddenly replaced by a Chinese national named Jeff who had lived in America for a long time. Even more than Cao, he began to play the divisive nationalistic card, and the American managers were soon almost completely replaced by Chinese managers. Pressures mounted. On the shopfloor the American workers harboured a litany of complaints: the speedup, the low wage, the disregard for occupational health and safety, the violation of environmental laws, and, above all, the lack of respect. In three years, over 3,000 American employees decided to leave.

By then, the initial sensibilities towards American workplace norms had been thrown out of the window. Former GM workers felt openly nostalgic for the good old days when they made 29 USD an hour with generous fringe benefits. Then they could easily buy a pair of sneakers for their kids, but not anymore. Some American workers held meetings where they poured out their grievances, and began

to agitate to set up a union branch. The Chinese workers looked on as a large number of the older workers struggled to unionise the shopfloor.

Clash between Labour and Management

Early in the film Cao vehemently objected to having a union in the factory. Now, faced with a rebellious workforce, he and his management team quickly learned something about how American companies fight off unions. At a fee of one million dollars, Jeff hired a public relations company specialised in fending off unions to design and implement a packet of anti-union activities. The company held mandatory anti-union meetings where the PR company warned the workers that should they strike, they could be replaced; the company got some workers to go around wearing 'Vote No' t-shirts; helped to identify and get pro-union workers fired;



Still from *American Factory*, Netflix, 2019.

and appealed to the short-term interests of the younger workers. Jeff raised the hourly wage by 2 USD just before the vote on whether the company should have a union. All the while, the Chinese workers watched on, quietly siding with management. On the day of the vote, the Chinese workers tensely glued their eyes to CCTV screens, and clapped and cheered when it was announced that two-thirds of the workers (mostly the younger ones) had voted 'no' to unionise.

After the election, Cao told his Chinese management staff to hire young workers and condition them to the Chinese working culture. Jeff gathered together the American workers who voted no and told them: 'Now you work for me We are a family. Let's make America great again.'

the American norm is an adversarial anti-union approach, and Cao was quick to understand and adopt this feature of American management.

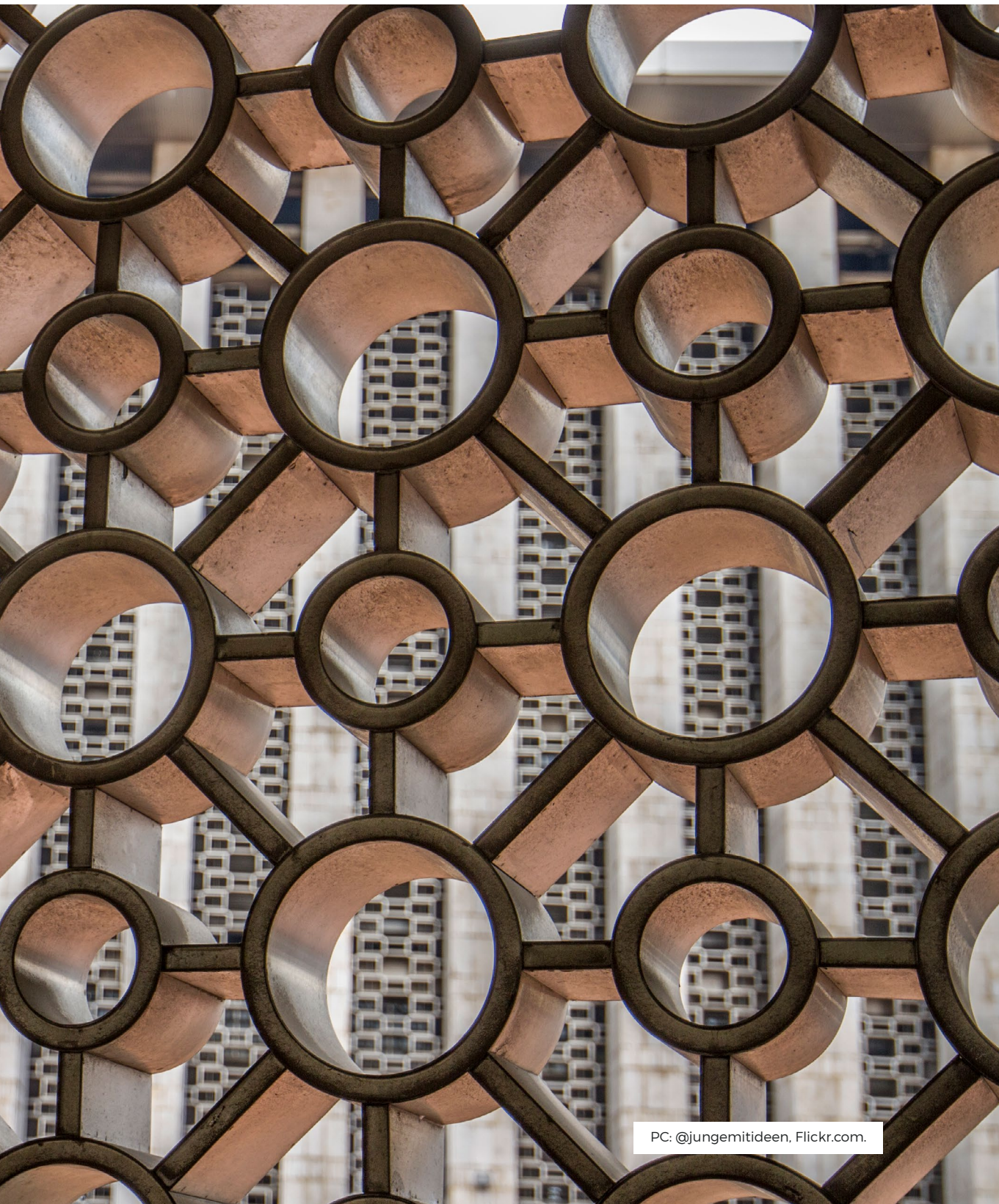
Late in the film, Cao inspects the shopfloor and is told that a number of new robotic machines had been installed that could each replace four workers. The directors' focus then shifts from a new scenario of workers being controlled by management to a future controlled by automation. The film ends on this bleak note, hinting that the spectre of automation-driven unemployment will eventually engulf all workers, no matter their nationality. ■

A Clash of Cultures?

To answer the question of whether there was a clash of cultures at Fuyao, we need to distinguish between the different kinds of culture present—national or industrial. On the shopfloor, in the beginning, despite the difference in national culture, the two groups of workers were ready to be accommodating and work together. With time, there was the potential for the emergence of a cross-national, class-based culture of labour solidarity. But the Chinese management strategically pre-empted the emergence of such a relationship. At the management level, there was no genuine attempt to launch a hybridisation process. Cao and Jeff's colonising managerial culture eventually trumped the American colonised worker culture. The only feature of the American system that Cao and his team ultimately incorporated into their management philosophy was the American anti-union culture. Unlike in China, which strives for harmonious workplace relations by incorporating and controlling the trade union,



WINDOW ON ASIA





Contentious Embeddedness

Chinese State Capital and the Belt and Road Initiative in Indonesia

Kuningan, Central Jakarta.
PC: @harrypwt, Flickr.com.

Angela TRITTO

This essay employs Polanyi's concept of 'embeddedness' to examine post-BRI Chinese investments in Indonesia. Using the case study of the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed railway, the article argues that key elements of this embeddedness can become active tools for policymakers to shape their strategy vis-à-vis Chinese investments. In particular, in the Indonesian context such elements include the deep-rooted anti-China sentiment, populist and protectionist tendencies, and the well-established presence of Japanese capital, inactive competition with Chinese capital for influence in the country.

The launch of China's Twenty-first Century Maritime Silk Road in 2013 during a speech by President Xi at the Indonesian parliament is a testament to the fact that, as the largest economy in Southeast Asia, Indonesia holds a special status in China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). From the perspective of the BRI strategy, Indonesia not only has the potential to exert influence in the whole region, but it also constitutes one of the largest and most populous emerging markets with geographical proximity to China.

However, the relationship between China and Indonesia has been far from smooth. As pointed out by Chua (2008), 'Chineseness' in Indonesia is a purposively negatively

stereotyped construct, built on the contested narrative that Chinese Indonesians' wealth makes up around 70 percent of the country's economy. In the past, this narrative allowed for a series of discriminatory policies against the Chinese Indonesian community, which has often become the target of pogroms, vandalism, and abuse, as it was blamed for political and economic crises: hence, the 'troubled relations' between the two countries (Sukma 1999). This sentiment is still strong nowadays and would seem to render the 'new' Chinese presence precarious.

The Importance of Embeddedness

In this context, the *embeddedness* of Chinese investments in Indonesia deserves attention. In Karl Polanyi's work (1944, 145), the concept of *embeddedness* encompasses three main considerations: a) markets are always and everywhere embedded, meaning that economic arrangements are constrained by intertwined economics, cultural, and political processes; b) markets at the national and global levels are shaped by an ongoing double movement in which the project by some sectors of society to expand the market always generates self-protective movements by others to subordinate it; and c) political contestations occur at multiple levels: local, regional, national, and supranational, shaping the economic paths available to society at any given moment.

The contested embeddedness of Chinese investments in Indonesia has been well documented by previous scholars (Sukma 1999; Herlijanto 2018). This embeddedness includes four key elements: the 'troubled' past of foreign relations between China and Indonesia; the strong protectionist tendencies of the political and economic elite in Indonesia; the widespread anti-China sentiment across different levels of society; and the longstanding presence in Indonesia of Japanese companies and government agencies.

The serious local resistance to Chinese actors has shaped both the approach of President Widodo's government to his negotiations as part of China's BRI and the attitudes of Chinese leaders of business associations, which range from exasperation to acquiescence or even understanding. The country's long-standing protectionist tendencies expanded into some sectors, effectively forcing Chinese firms to establish joint ventures with local partners. Chinese companies have also been pressured into forms of regulatory compliance, which is at times unclear, arbitrary, or exploitable by corrupt officials. The developmental statecraft of Indonesian leaders has encouraged major Chinese investments out of mineral extraction and into mineral processing in an attempt to move up the value chain.

Contentious Negotiations

President Joko Widodo saw the BRI as an opportunity to bring much needed capital for infrastructure and industry development. Hence, using the political influence that Indonesia holds in the Southeast Asia region, along with the negative sentiment and countermobilisation against Chinese investment, the Indonesian government has been negotiating deals skewed in its favour (Tritto forthcoming). Much of this sentiment and countermobilisation, in part fuelled by social media, has revolved around questions of *production and ethos* (see Lee 2017). A centrepiece was the question of illegal Chinese workers entering Indonesia, with online rumours in 2019 alleging that this invisible contingent had already reached one million (Anwar 2019). Videos and news from the Indonesia Morowali Industrial Park, a Chinese-invested smelter plant, show incompatibility between the Chinese and the Indonesian ethos of production, as differential salaries, cultural and religious norms, and attitudes toward work gave rise to conflicts and protests (The

Jakarta Post 2017a; The Jakarta Post 2017b). These frictions, however, led to not only an adjustment of the modes of production, but also to a series of official statements, inspections, and high-level directives for Chinese companies operating in Indonesia. One such example is the statement by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang during his official visit to Indonesia for the Indonesia China Business Summit. The declaration came after a wave of criticism against illegal Chinese workers in the country, which triggered a series of official inspections of Chinese industrial parks (Hermansyah 2017). Li exhorted Chinese companies to respect the law and hire Indonesian workers, but also urged the Indonesian government to reform the administrative process for investing in the country (Tempo 2018).

The presidential elections of 2019 were held against the backdrop of these contentious negotiations with Chinese capital. On that occasion, President Widodo faced a challenger who was the embodiment of Indonesia's populism and nationalism: Prabowo Subianto (Aspinall 2015). General Subianto, who later joined Widodo's cabinet as Defence Minister, built his latest campaign—as well as the previous one—on the claim that Indonesia's economic shortfalls were due to exploitation by foreign powers, particularly China. He led the initial counter-mobilisation against the Jakarta–Bandung HSR (Camba 2020). Had he been elected, the support for China's BRI in Indonesia would have certainly been imperilled.

A Case Study in Contrast: Japan

An important element of the contested *embeddedness* of Chinese capital in Indonesia is another, much more fluidly embedded, foreign capital: that of Japan. Investment from Japanese firms has been flowing into the country since the beginning of Soeharto's New Order in 1966, when the leader reshaped the FDI environment

by re-establishing Indonesia's ties with the capitalist world economy (Lindblant 2015). Since then, Japanese investors in Indonesia have experienced quite a steep learning curve. Riots and protests such as the Malari incident in 1974, which saw students mobilise against pressures by Japanese competition to local businesses, led to protectionist reforms. This protectionism shaped Japanese capital until the 1990s, when it evolved into the mix of official development assistance (ODA) tied to foreign direct investments (FDI) that is its defining feature today. Up to the 1990s, Indonesia had been the largest ODA recipient from Japan and, until this day, Japan maintains its primacy as the leading source of FDI in Indonesia (Wie 1994).

The long history of Japanese investments in Indonesia endowed Japanese companies, bureaucrats, and think tanks not only with strong ties to the local elites, but also with a specific knowledge of cultural and business norms. A series of interviews conducted between 2017 and 2019 with Indonesian business leaders and members of local organisations showed a strong favouritism towards doing business with Japanese companies, because the 'unfamiliar style and culture of Chinese business models made them less trustworthy'. In this often too generalised and stereotyped comparison, the interviewees also emphasised how the Chinese companies 'acted cocky and aggressively' and could mobilise capital and production at speeds that were impossible to achieve by compliance-bound Japanese companies. The example of the Jakarta–Bandung high-speed rail (HSR) project shows, however, that the renewed strength of diplomatic relations between China and Indonesia, as well as China's strong political will exerted through its state-linked actors have managed to overcome the contentious embeddedness of Chinese investments in Indonesia.

Parameter	Chinese-Indonesian consortium (KCIC)	Japanese consortium
Project value	5.13 billion USD	6.2 billion USD
Government commitment	There is no government underwriting, funding, or tariff subsidy Cost overrun: KCIC's responsibility	Government underwriting is required, funding from state's budget and tariff subsidy Cost overrun: government's responsibility
Business concept	The Joint Venture Company (i.e., KCIC) is responsible for construction and operations. Projects risk: KCIC	Engineering, Procurement, and Construction, Financing (Regular Contractor). Risk/liability: government
Local content	58,6 percent	40 percent
New jobs creation	Construction period: 39,000 workers per year. The Chinese workers employed are limited to experts and supervisors.	Construction period: 35,000 workers per year. Expatriates from Japan are required.
Technology transfer	Through the opening of rolling stock factory in Indonesia.	There was no tangible technology transfer programme.

Table 1: Comparison between the Chinese and Japanese proposals to build the HSR. Source: Kereta Cepat Jakarta Bandung (The Jakarta-Bandung High-speed Rail). March 2017. Informative booklet provided during interview with KCIC.

The Case of the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Rail

Plans to build an HSR in Java between Jakarta, Indonesia's capital city, and Bandung, the third largest city, had been floated even before 2010 (Barun 2010). Around September 2013, Japan made the first concrete proposals to sign an MOU with the Indonesian Ministry of Transportation for the construction of a Museum of Transport in Jakarta (Tempo 2013). At the time, the Japan International Cooperation Agency funded a first feasibility study to bring Shikansen trains to Indonesia

(Parlina 2013). The feasibility study was ready in 2014, the year in which Joko Widodo became Indonesia's new president.

However, Japan's entreaties faced competition from China's ambitious connectivity plan to export its HSR technology through the BRI. After Joko Widodo's visit to China in March 2015, China and Indonesia signed a Joint Statement on Strengthening Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. This document included the 'MOU on Infrastructure and Industrial



Jakarta-Bandung Railway.
PC: @muhamadadlil,
Flickr.com.

Cooperation’ and the ‘Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation on the Jakarta-Bandung High Speed Rail Project’ between the National Development and Reform Commission of the PRC and the Ministry of State-owned Enterprises of the Republic of Indonesia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015). In April 2015, President Xi and President Widodo also inked a framework for the development of the 142-kilometre HSR (Wu and Chen 2015).

The months between April and September 2015 saw a heated competition between Japan and China to build this line. This competition involved negotiations between governments, whose projects called on policy banks and key national companies for their financing and implementation. In July, the Indonesian government organised a closed bid between the two countries to allow them to display their proposals, which local headlines referred to as a ‘beauty contest’ (Suroyo 2015). The Coordinating Minister of Maritime Affairs Luhut Panjaitan commented: ‘Let them race to invest in Indonesia. It is good for us ... It is

like a girl wanted by many guys; the girl then can pick whomever she likes’ (Agence France Presse 2015). In September, the news reported that the Indonesian government had selected the proposal by China, but that shortly after had cancelled the whole plan because of technical and financial considerations (The Straits Times 2015). The Chinese government responded by offering a plan that required no government guarantees, which eventually gained favour in the Indonesian government. Table 1 summarises the conditions of the proposed Chinese and Japanese plans.

High-speed Rail Diplomacy

The Jakarta-Bandung HSR is emblematic of China’s ‘high-speed rail diplomacy’ in Southeast Asia. Before this deal, China often offered to build HSR lines through Engineering Procurement and Construction

(EPC) contracts, as in the case of the Malaysia–Singapore HSR, the Ankara–Istanbul HSR, or the Addis Ababa–Djibouti freight rail. However, in Indonesia a joint venture company named PT Kereta Cepat Indonesia China (KCIC), formed by a cluster of Indonesian and Chinese state-owned enterprises, is responsible for the construction and for at least 50 years of operating the line. The Pilar Sinergi BUMN Indonesia consortium (the Indonesian part of KCIC) holds a 60 percent stake in the joint venture and consists of four Indonesian state-owned companies that hold various mono or oligopolistic positions: Wijaya Karya (construction), Kereta Api Indonesia (railway), Jasa Marga (highways), and Perkebunan Nusantara VIII (agribusiness).

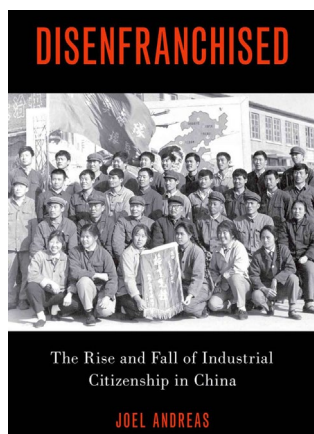
The consortium mode, along with the requirement for local materials to be used and for the employment of local labour, set a new precedent for other countries to imitate. For instance, after his election in 2018, Malaysian former Premier Mahathir successfully renegotiated the deal for the East Coal Rail Link to include better localisation and financing terms (The Star Online 2019). Similarly, after a round of renegotiations, the new Thai government adopted a consortium model led by the Thai CP Group (Reuters 2019). Most importantly, according to an interview with a leading scholar researching on China's export of HSR technology, 'The Indonesia HSR is a very symbolic but also very atypical project in the scenario of BRI HSR projects because it requires no government guarantees, which puts unwanted pressure on the China Development Bank.' Hence, the 4.5-billion-USD 40-year concessionary loan that covers 75 percent of the project cost signed between KCIC and the China Development Bank in May 2017 requires no guarantees from the Indonesian government (Reuters 2017).

Analysts and institutions like the OECD have commented on the implications that these loans may have on the stability of China's financial institutions and on the likelihood of their repayments (OECD 2018). A senior executive of Sinosure—a company that provided payment

guarantees to projects like the rail line between Ethiopia and Djibouti, which lost 1 billion USD—was critical towards the project, saying it 'lacked adequate planning' (Ng 2018).

Hence, the above discussion shows a potential conflict between political and economic goals. In this case it would seem the Chinese government was intent on winning a strategic bid, and that the terms appealed to President Widodo, among other leaders, as it provided the possibility of a quickly-finished project on generous terms that could coincide with his re-election. If, on the one hand, this new consortium model between state-owned companies might constitute an innovative way to add new infrastructure in developing countries without tapping into state budgets, the time pressure exerted by political agendas could eventually result in less control over the financial and economic viability of project, which in turn could have societal and environmental implications.

The case of the Jakarta–Bandung HSR shows how China's BRI projects are shaped by their 'embeddedness' in a certain country. The improvement in foreign relations, the quintessentially protectionists tendencies in Indonesia, the high visibility of the project and, hence, its potential to shape public opinion—as well as the competition with Japan—are all factors that influenced the final outcome of the deal. These projects are not only embedded in the economic, cultural, and political processes of the host country, but are also embedded in a regional and international context, where information flows and affects negotiations in other countries. Contestations can come at multiple levels, but also from within certain organisations, because of the conflicts between political motivations and economic benefits, which can especially affect state capital. Overall, this case shows how embeddedness is not a static set of conditions upon which Chinese capital acts, but rather a dynamic set of processes that actively shape this contentious new flow of capital from China, as well as Indonesia's political, economic, and social environment. ■



Disenfranchised: The Rise and Fall of Industrial Citizenship in China (Oxford University Press 2019)

Disenfranchised

A Conversation with Joel Andreas

Ivan FRANCESCHINI

Work units (单位) and the ‘cradle-to-grave’ employment model that they represented have not escaped the general rejection of China’s Maoist past. Not only have they become symbols of inefficiency, but they have also been criticised for putting workers in a position of total dependence and therefore subjugation. In *Disenfranchised: The Rise and Fall of Industrial Citizenship in China* (Oxford University Press 2019), Joel Andreas attempts to set the record straight by tracing the changing political status of workers inside Chinese factories from 1949 to the present.

Ivan Franceschini: The work units of the Maoist era have often been described as inefficient and wasteful, and were blamed as being one of the main reasons of the backwardness of the Chinese economy before the reforms began. Do you think this is a fair representation?

Joel Andreas: First, we should reconsider the premise of these arguments—that the Chinese economy was backwards before the post-Mao reform era began. During the first three decades after 1949, China made remarkable advances in terms of industrial development. Between 1952 and 1965, industrial production grew by an average of 12.3 percent a year, and from 1965 through 1978 it grew by an average of 10.2 percent a year, keeping pace with Japan during this period, the years of the ‘Japanese miracle’. That is not as rapid as during the post-Reform decades (11.6 percent a year between 1978 and 1995, and an extraordinary 13.8 percent a year from 1995 to 2008), but it is remarkable nonetheless. China, of course, was still a relatively poor and undeveloped country in the mid-1970s, but it was far more developed than it had been in 1949, and its accomplishments were quite impressive in comparative terms. It developed a range of modern industries that had not existed within the country before 1949. It accomplished this through an accumulation regime that funnelled surplus into industrial investment, leaving relatively little for consumption. But it employed virtually the entire urban population (which meant it had by far the highest female labour force participation rate in the world), and it guaranteed everyone a living income.



Joel Andreas

China's work units were not organised to maximise profit, which meant that they were not particularly efficient, in terms of profit-generation as well as other measures. For instance, the fact that the state was determined to employ the entire population and that the vast majority of work unit employees had permanent status limited the flexibility of factories to hire and fire workers, which inhibited the maximisation of labour productivity. On the other hand, from a national perspective, little labour was wasted through unemployment.

For much of the Mao era, workers not only enjoyed lifetime job tenure, but wages and benefits were remarkably egalitarian, and work units faced constraints in using material labour incentives. These policies have been blamed for putting a damper on individuals' incentive to work hard. There is certainly something to these claims, but the impact of these policies was complex. Retired workers and cadres I interviewed almost universally insisted that people worked hard during the early decades of the socialist era, in large part because they identified with their work units due to the fact that they were permanent members. This, along with egalitarian distribution, created a social foundation conducive to the Communist Party's collectivist rhetoric.

This foundation was eroded during the reform era, as work unit members were gradually reduced to hired hands and the compensation of enterprise leaders began to greatly outstrip that of workers. Especially after the radical restructuring of industry—including the privatisation of most factories—began in the mid-1990s, incentives and punishments, including threats of termination, have been required to stimulate work discipline. With factories striving to minimise employment and maximise work intensity, labour productivity has increased, but factories are much less pleasant places to work.

IF: An idea that gained traction in the 1980s is that the agency of Chinese workers was largely constrained by their dependency on the work unit for the provision of welfare and public services. How does this idea hold up in front of the pervasive shopfloor activism of the Mao and early reform eras?

JA: Labour activism in China today is certainly quite different from labour activism in the past. When workers were permanent members of their work units, they were, indeed, dependent, as they could not easily change jobs and they depended on workplace welfare provision. Factory leaders, however, were also dependent on them. In the book, I show that work unit membership gave workers a kind of

workplace citizenship rights. They were considered legitimate stakeholders and could not be fired, which gave them a great deal of power on the shop floor throughout the work unit era, which extended from the 1950s through the 1990s. Moreover, during the Cultural Revolution, they confronted factory leaders in a highly organised, collective fashion. Rank-and-file workers organised their own ‘rebel’ groups, which hauled leaders up on stages to be criticised, and much of the criticism was about abuse of power and mistreatment of workers. The political and ideological constraints of those years, of course, were quite narrow, but within those constraints workers exercised a great deal of agency.

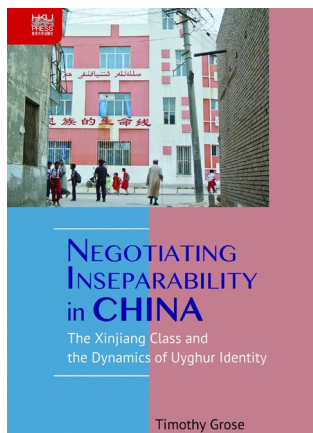
Today, the situation is fundamentally different. After permanent employment and workplace-provided welfare were eliminated, workers became less dependent on their employers, but having weak ties to one’s workplace is a double-edged sword. When labour markets are tight, workers’ mobility gives them a degree of market power, but their position is fundamentally weak because they can easily be fired and organising collectively is difficult.

IF: In the book you write that Chinese workers today are beginning to reorganise and their strikes and protests have won important victories, but also state that until they are able to regain some form of workplace citizenship rights, their gains will be limited and precarious. What would a possible way forward be in such a context?

JA: Factory workers in many countries today, including China, find it difficult to organise because employment is precarious and organising efforts are met with repression by the state and employers. The conditions faced by Chinese workers are particular in some ways. On the one hand, state capacity—including its capacity for repression—is relatively high and the authorities have been able to suppress efforts to create independent labour organisations. On the other hand, because labour markets for low-wage factory jobs have been tight and the state is reluctant to inflame popular opposition through excessive repression, there has been some room for strikes and for informal bargaining about employment conditions. As of now, however, repression is intensifying and Chinese workers remain in a very weak position. This will only change if they are able to mount a broad, powerful movement for workers’ rights.

IF: What lessons can we draw from the history of the socialist work unit in China in light of the neoliberal turn and pervasive precarity of recent years?

JA: The neoliberal turn across the globe and the collapse of socialist relations of production in the former socialist world has had a deep and lasting impact on the nature of employment. The current state of affairs, however, is also temporary. Workers will not put up with the degradation of their working conditions forever; they will once again demand greater rights to their jobs and more power to determine their conditions of work, as they have in the past. When new movements to fundamentally change the nature of employment arise, it will be critical to understand what happened in the twentieth century—when movements inspired by socialist ideas emerged as a powerful force—and to look especially carefully at the social experiments in countries where these movements took power. The purpose of my book is to help provide this understanding. ■



Negotiating Inseparability in China (Hong Kong University Press 2019)

Negotiating Inseparability in China

A Conversation with Timothy Grose

Ivan FRANCESCHINI

Over the past few years Uyghurs in Xinjiang have been the target of unprecedented repression by the Chinese Party-state. However, efforts to assimilate this ethnicity within the Han-dominated ‘Chinese Nation’ (中华民族) long predate the establishment of reeducation camps in 2017. A good example is the case of the ‘Xinjiang Class’ (内地新疆高中班), a programme that funds senior high school-aged students from Xinjiang, mostly ethnic Uyghurs, to attend a four-year course in predominately Han-populated cities in eastern and coastal China. In *Negotiating Inseparability in China: The Xinjiang Class and the Dynamics of Uyghur Identity* (Hong Kong University Press 2019), Timothy Grose offers a detailed picture of the multilayered identities of contemporary Uyghur youth and an assessment of the effectiveness of the programme in meeting its political goals.

Ivan Franceschini: Your book examines the experiences of Uyghur graduates of the ‘Xinjiang Class’ national boarding school programme. Can you tell us more about this programme in the context of the ethnic policies promoted by the Chinese Party-state?



Timothy Grose

Timothy Grose: The Xinjiang Class is a national boarding school programme, established in 2000, that seeks to educate mostly Uyghurs on campuses located across central and eastern China (内地). In terms of academics, the schools and intensive learning environments are meant to prepare ethnic-minority students for the college entrance exam. However, the political goals, which are often emphasised over the mastery of any subject, seek to train a cohort of ethnic minority intellectuals who are sympathetic to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its state-building projects in Xinjiang. Therefore, to a certain extent these programmes resemble boarding schools established in North America and Australia, which attempted (sometimes successfully) to assimilate indigenous peoples.

As I continue to reflect on the Xinjiang Class boarding schools, recently imposed policies in Xinjiang—especially mass internment, ‘home visits’ (访惠聚), and so-called ‘beautification projects’ (美丽庭院)—and how they fit within the broader framework of the CCP’s ethnic praxes, I am growing more

confident that policies affecting Uyghurs (as well as Kazakhs and Tibetans) are radical and extreme exceptions to the CCP's attempts to manage the country's ethnic and ethno-national diversity. To be sure, 'amalgamation' (融合)—that is, the fusion of all ethnic and ethno-national groups into an all-encompassing nation, but one that retains mostly Han elements—has a long history in China-based politics and continues to undergird the ethnic policies of the CCP. Some of these policies are uniformly carried out across the country.

However, if we compare the frightening realities facing the Uyghurs with those of the Yi, Naxi, and even Dongxiang and Salar minorities, etc., we discover dramatic policy differences. More specifically, ethnic policies implemented outside Xinjiang generally do not intend to severely curtail or eliminate native languages, religious devotions, or indigenous organisation of domestic space. Conversely, policies enforced in the aforementioned areas appear to effectively protect, preserve, and even celebrate meaningful expressions of ethnic minority culture.

Yet, Uyghurs (and Tibetans and Kazakhs) have seemingly been thrust into a different (and unofficial) category of 'ethnic others'. Although these groups are dogmatically included in lists of China's 55 minority *minzu* (ethnic and ethno-national groups), the CCP does not treat them as complacent ethnic minority 'little brothers and sisters', but as untrustworthy, delinquent adolescents who need to be 'scared straight'. Indeed, the CCP is instilling fear—of detention, denial of resources, loss of cultural markers, and so on—into these groups to force a type of performative obedience. But this forced 'social stability' is frail and will likely crack in the future. These groups' recent memories of independence, politically-active diaspora communities, and commitments to non-Chinified (and transnational) faith-based communities make it unlikely that they will ever be completely satisfied in the current configuration vis-à-vis the Party-state, Han majority, and the so-called 'Chinese Nation'. The CCP needs to fundamentally change its course if the Party truly hopes to establish trust with these groups.

IF: Identity politics play a large role in your analysis. Can you tell us more about how the Uyghur youths whom you interviewed perceive their position in relation to the 'Chinese Nation'? Can your interviewees be considered a representative sample of the new generation of Uyghurs?

TG: In the book, I consciously avoid generalising the experiences of Uyghur Xinjiang Class graduates, and I hesitate to suggest they are somehow representative of young Uyghurs

in the twenty-first century. To be sure, the Xinjiang Class introduced a curriculum—Chinese-only instruction, emphasis on ‘correct’ political ideology, and near zero-tolerance of religious practice—that is beginning to dominate state schooling in Xinjiang. But perhaps observable similarities end there.

Scholarship tends to agree that the social process of identifying with human collectivities is shaped by very specific, often ephemeral experiences and historical contexts. In other words, although my interlocutors are bilingual (Uyghur and Chinese) Uyghurs—as many young, educated Uyghurs are—the sociopolitical backdrop against which they lived in boarding schools in eastern China before the Ürümchi protest of 2009 and the mass internment of 2016 cannot ever be replicated. Therefore, their understandings of Uyghurness, Chineseness, etc., were informed by these specific historical and political currents. Although this conclusion may be frustrating, we should be reminded that ethnic identity is simultaneously so interesting for scholars and potentially threatening to the modern nation-state precisely because it cannot be created and controlled in a laboratory-type setting.

Speaking only about the individuals included in my study, though, I noticed a partial embrace of their state-ascribed identity as part of the ‘Chinese Nation’. To be sure, I had to put faith in my analysis to arrive at this conclusion because they never invoked the concept during our interactions. In fact, during my years of field research, I was extremely careful not to reify officially-defined groups. Therefore, I never asked my friends and informants for their thoughts on the ‘Chinese Nation’. Still, my interlocutors, many of whom I gained trust with over several years, never spoke about a longing for an independent East Turkestan nor did they refuse to speak Chinese; some even enjoyed celebrating holidays like the Spring Festival. I interpreted these behaviours as selective participation in the ‘Chinese Nation’.

However, they also insinuated that the CCP included them in the ‘Chinese Nation’ as a perfunctory gesture. Although these individuals were academically successful and thrived in a Chinese education system, they insisted their skills and abilities would not be fully utilised in Xinjiang or China for that matter. Many complained bitterly about the few job prospects available to them in their homeland, many of which—they insisted—would be subordinate to Han employers and managers. In the vast majority of cases, their predictions proved to be accurate.

IF: The Chinese Party-state justifies the existence of the reeducation camps in Xinjiang as a way to eradicate religious extremism among the Uyghur population. What role did religion play in the identity of your interviewees? How did they feel about such rhetoric?

TG: Many of the graduates I befriended and interviewed identified Islam as an important reference point in their constellation of Uyghurness. Yet, the book demonstrates how varied pious behaviour is among Xinjiang Class graduates. Certainly, many of them became interested in Islam as university students in other parts of China because they met non-Xinjiang Class Uyghurs, Muslims from other countries, and accessed Islamic knowledge (mosques, books, websites, etc.) unavailable in Xinjiang. To sate their religious curiosities, some of my interlocutors began observing at least some of the five obligatory prayers (*namaz/salat*), reading the Qur'an, fasting during Ramadan, or adopting pious dress.

With that said, it is difficult to predict whether this newfound religiosity will remain an important part of these individuals' ethno-national (and personal) identities throughout their lives. Similar to ethnic identity itself, religious convictions can unpredictably strengthen and weaken over a lifetime. Before the current crisis, I was planning to conduct follow-up interviews with a group of 15 key individuals both inside and outside the PRC 10, 20, and 30 years after finishing their boarding school education. Tragically, this research is far too dangerous at present.

IF: How have your interviewees been affected by the new repressive measures implemented by the Chinese leadership since 2017?

TG: I think every Uyghur has been affected in some way, many directly, by these repressive measures. During my last visit to Xinjiang in the summer of 2017, I was told that one of my friends (a graduate of the programme who was pursuing a graduate degree in Turkey) had been detained when he returned home for a wedding. Several graduates who found work in Ürümqi were sent back to their hometowns (i.e., the locale tied to their household registration). Unfortunately but understandably, I have lost contact with my Uyghur contacts who remained in China and have not received information about their well-being. The fact that my Xinjiang Class contacts have also been affected by these policies exposes a startling truth: the CCP even distrusts those Uyghurs who voluntarily participated—and succeeded—in the Party's carefully-conceived education initiative. ■



THE POWER OF PLACE

Contentious Politics in Twentieth-Century
Shanghai and Bombay

MARK W. FRAZIER



*The Power of Place: Contentious Politics in
Twentieth-Century Shanghai and Bombay*
(Cambridge University Press 2019)



Mark Frazier

The Power of Place

A Conversation with Mark Frazier

Ivan FRANCESCHINI

Shanghai and Mumbai are leading centres of manufacturing and finance. In *The Power of Place: Contentious Politics in Twentieth-Century Shanghai and Bombay* (Cambridge University Press 2019), Mark Frazier adopts a comparative historical lens to chronicle the political biographies of these metropolises, reconstructing an impressive series of riots, strikes, and protests that shook the two cities in the twentieth century. In so doing, he unearths hidden connections that provide new insight into contemporary debates over informal housing, eviction of inner-city residents, scarcities of manufacturing jobs, and questions of unequal citizenship.

Ivan Franceschini: What brought you to compare two cities as different as Shanghai and Mumbai?

Mark Frazier: They are not as different as one might think. Yes, they are located in nation-states (some would say civilisational-states) with stark contrasts in culture, religion, and politics, but as cities they have a great deal in common, especially when one looks at their trajectories from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. Both cities became global trading hubs under nineteenth-century British colonial capitalism. Shanghai's emergence as a global textile manufacturing centre owed its origins in part to the import of cotton yarn from Bombay mills in the nineteenth century. In the first decades of the twentieth century, both cities saw the emergence of potent nationalist movements, which also sought to link up with labour agitation among the textile workers. The textile industry was the leading employer in both cities for much of the twentieth century, and the site of frequent strikes.

The even more surprising convergences came as I studied the 1950s, when similar political trends emerged under two quite different regimes: the demobilisation of labour unions, the repression of popular protests, and a growing resentment over the allocation of urban goods and services (especially housing and jobs) to insiders—Party officials and loyalists in the case of Shanghai, and 'alien' non-native Indian elites in the case of Bombay. These resentments broke out, in very different ideological currents, in the very same year, 1966, which saw the

rise of the Shiv Sena as a nativist movement in Bombay and the rise of numerous organisations with socioeconomic grievances in the context of the Cultural Revolution in Shanghai.

In the late twentieth century, both cities (re)opened to global and regional capital flows. With the liberalisation of land ownership policies, land prices soared and gave rise to vast wealth among insiders who could leverage the policies to their advantage (district government officials in the case of Shanghai, private capitalists in the case of Mumbai). Land-led development also wiped out the manufacturing sector in both cities in short order by the early twenty-first century. Mumbai's pace of urban transformation has indeed been slower than Shanghai's (no city can rival Shanghai in that respect), but the very fact that Mumbai elites use Shanghai as a common reference point for the kind of urban transformation they would like to see is another recent example of the many historical connections and comparisons one can make between the two cities.

IF: You describe long series of citywide protests in response to political and economic inequality that took place in both Mumbai and Shanghai throughout the twentieth century. You then show how by the end of the past century this kind of popular mobilisation had given way to fragmented protests, largely against residential relocation and redevelopment projects. How do you explain this shift?

MF: I came at this project with an assumption that one hears frequently—that rising levels of inequality generate political conflict. If that is true, one would expect to see ever-rising levels of tension and conflict in the two cities with or near the highest levels of income inequality in their respective countries. Shanghai and Mumbai have seen significant protests during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, as income inequalities rose, but these pale in comparison to the massive rallies and marches that one finds before then. So there is more to sustained protest movements than simply rising income inequality.

In the last section of the book, I discuss the ways in which both cities have undergone rapid de-industrialisation, including the disappearance of the politically powerful textile industry and its workers. The main cause of de-industrialisation was the rapid rise in land prices, which made manufacturing zones much more profitable for commercial and residential uses. At the same time, new housing policies have changed the landscapes of both cities as well as what people protest about. In both cities, textile workers and their families have been compensated for the loss of the industry by housing policies that essentially grant ownership (after a required period of residence) to the workers.

These ‘relocation housing’ projects are today prominent in the Shanghai suburbs and in Mumbai’s old mill districts. The former proletariat (literally, ‘propertyless’) have become small property owners of units that have seen tenfold increases in the value of the property over the past decade. There is no solid proof that housing ownership alters political outlooks, but protests have become more localised in scope—grievances arise from poor provision of public services in the relocated housing areas, and from ‘not in my backyard’ reactions to industrial or other facilities seen as dangerous or harmful to property values.

IF: In spite of this break, is it possible to identify elements of continuities across time in terms of political geography and contentious politics in the two cities?

MF: The common thread is that urban political geography can help us understand broad patterns of popular protest. *The Power of Place* makes two main claims: first, that changes over time in the layout of the city—its industrial zones, housing stock (including tenement housing), civic spaces, and migrant neighbourhoods are associated with new forms of identity and agency in contentious politics. Second, movement organisers and leaders tend to successfully mobilise the urban populace when they situate their ideologies and broader claims in terms of local grievances. For example, the Communist Party of India (CPI) in Bombay in the 1920s was far more successful than the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) operating in Shanghai at the same time. This was because the communists in Bombay eschewed class and ideological questions in favour of community organising in the textile mill districts. When the time came to confront employers, they had much more support from workers as a result. The CCP in Shanghai eventually learned this lesson, short-lived though it was, in mobilising a broad coalition during the Three Armed Workers’ Uprisings in 1926–7—during which they called for a city self-ruled by citizens, free of warlord and imperialist domination. In a similar pattern, the rise of the Shiv Sena in the 1960s—and their violent expulsion of the CPI from the mill districts, stemmed from their impressive community-organising efforts, based on a kind of constructed victimhood of the local Marathi-speaking population. The Shiv Sena remains a political force in Mumbai today, frequently garnering support to stand as the ruling party in both municipal and state governments. Of course, in contemporary Shanghai it is impossible to mobilise an organised opposition based on local grievances, but the CCP from its early days in governing Shanghai and all other cities quickly established a grassroots governance of neighbourhood and residence committees that mediated and addressed issues stemming from housing, social

services, and other community concerns. One of the reasons that the CCP today so obsessively controls the work of NGOs is the fear that NGOs might attain a certain degree of autonomy and political support at the expense of the CCP—for example, an NGO that organises services and support for migrant workers within urban villages.

IF: Do you think that your analysis can be broadened to other ‘global cities’ of today?

MF: I am less interested in the concept of ‘global cities’—a term that suggests a group of cities with dense linkages to each other in the form of professions, corporations, consumption, business districts, etc. Shanghai and Mumbai would qualify for that label by most measures, but what I am suggesting goes beyond global cities. My study of political geography and popular protest in twentieth-century Shanghai and Mumbai was motivated in part by the pattern seen in several large-scale protests in the mid 2010s—the Occupy movements around the world and the Arab Spring protests. These urban uprisings arose from different sources and voiced different demands, but they seemed to be quite adept at deploying their ranks in strategically or symbolically important civic spaces. I think the analysis in *Power of Place* tries to explore the connections between place and protest, not by confirming specific hypotheses for universal application but in developing propositions that could offer insights in other cases of urban contentious politics.

A clear example of the connections between place and protest can be found in Hong Kong. The gradual integration with the mainland in terms of infrastructure, tourism, and education policies (among much else) over the past decade emboldened a latent Hong Kong identity, and prompted sustained protests against the local government for undermining local autonomy under the one country, two systems formula. In the Hong Kong of 2019 (as also seen in my chapter on anti-imperialist protests in Shanghai and Bombay in 1919), protestors held marches and short-term sit-ins in strategic sites of imperial power (a Beijing-dominated Legislative Council, for example), boycotted businesses deemed to have pro-Beijing stances, and demanded the withdrawal of a proposed piece of legislation seen as coming from Beijing. In Bombay in 1919, citizens mobilised against the renewal of British anti-sedition laws, and in Shanghai of course it was an international treaty reflecting the dominance of great powers (including Japan) at China’s expense. So in this sense, my analysis could be used as a kind of heuristic device to study patterns of urban popular protest, by looking at changes in political geographies, especially for civic space, residential and

work patterns, migrant enclaves, etc., and how these changes influence conceptions of citizenship and claims against state power at local, national, and even international scales. ■

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